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By DJ Rosenthal

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About the Author

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Academically, Rosenthal has been an Adjunct Professor at the University of Maryland Honors College since 2013, teaching a seminar on National Security Dilemmas. A prolific author on national security, global diplomacy, and technology, his work has appeared in publications such as The Hill, CNN, The New York Times, Politico, The Atlantic, and the Yale Journal of International Affairs. He holds a Juris Doctor from The George Washington University Law School and a Bachelor of Arts with Honors from the University of Maryland Honors College.

Abstract

This article argues that achieving lasting peace in the Israel-Palestinian conflict necessitates moving beyond purely political solutions to embrace reconciliation, which is generally neglected. While acknowledging the profound devastation and complex geopolitical realities, I contend that the persistent cycle of violence, dehumanization, and blame stems from unaddressed “root causes” of extremism and deeply entrenched binary thinking. Drawing on foundational psychological insights, the paper illustrates how powerful psychological forces, such as the “minimal group paradigm,” set the preconditions for and then perpetuate conflict and acts of cruelty. But these forces need not reduce perpetual conflict to an inevitability. Successful reconciliation efforts in other seemingly intractable conflicts, and inspiring grassroots initiatives, demonstrate the powerful moderating force of the “contact hypothesis.” From these examples, I assert that only through a multi-faceted commitment to reconciliation, including by actively challenging tribal absolutism and fostering a shared commitment to universal human values, can both Israelis and Palestinians cultivate a future where peace can take root and flourish.

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I. Beyond the Root Causes

In a previous article published in the Yale Journal of International Affairs, I argued that Hamas is not Israel's core enemy.[1] The core enemy instead comprises the root causes of extremism – the underlying conditions that give rise to it. These, not their byproducts, pose the more enduring and existential threat to Israel's long-term security, because without addressing those root causes, the cycle of hatred and violence is doomed to continue.

Through the power of social forces, from the seduction and coercion of authority figures moored to religious fanaticism to the exploitation of power vacuums by failed states to human desperation fueled by hunger, disease, widespread unemployment and myriad other social forces, otherwise ordinary people can be transformed into practitioners of violent ideologies. This transformation, I argued, unlocks a scary potential that exists within us all, and is reminiscent of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," where understandings of reality (and of conceptions of right and wrong and good and evil) are heavily influenced by individual experience.

But understanding the root causes of extremism is only the beginning. The competing perceptions of the violent attacks against Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023, as a grotesque demonstration of depravity by monsters, or a terrible but foreseeable reaction to what came before, and the destruction of Gaza in its aftermath as a necessary response to protect a people or acts of genocide, has laid bare the self-perpetuating cycle of blame, recrimination, demonization, dehumanization, and violence that has ensnared both Israelis and Palestinians for generations. Once in motion, this cycle feeds off its own terrible momentum, with each act of violence offering justification for the next. Evil triumphs not when the first of its deeds occurs, but when evil "is returned."[2] And the stories that both sides to this conflict tell is not that each bears some responsibility, but that culpability rests nearly or exclusively with the other side.

Both sides to this conflict employ a strikingly similar logic, where it is their policy, or their obstinance, or their missed opportunities, or their nature that justifies our violence; it is their violence that justifies ours in response.

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[1] DJ Rosenthal, "Hamas is Not Israel's Core Enemy," Yale Journal of International Affairs, January 22, 2024, https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/hamas-is-not-israels-core-enemy.

[2] Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 214.

And so it is with the relationship between the modern state of Israel and Palestinians, where ancient grievances and biblical roots beget early Zionist settlements, which begets Arab revolts, which begets the 1929 Hebron massacre, which begets the Irgun's retaliatory attacks, which begets the Grand Mufti's alliance with Hitler, which begets the Nakba, which begets the rise of the PLO, which begets the 1967 occupation, which begets the settlement movement, which begets the 1982 Lebanon War and Sabra and Shatila massacres, which begets the First Intifada, which begets the failures of the Oslo Accords, which begets the Second Intifada, which begets the Gaza blockade, which begets Hamas rockets, which begets Israeli military operations. Blame and death mark each action, justified by something prior, and justifying something in return.

The relentless cycle, once rolling, becomes perpetually harder to arrest. Yesterday's victims become tomorrow's aggressors, each side believing they have a monopoly on pain, fear, and loss. Convinced that barbarism and inhumanity are the core attributes of their adversary, each side believes that violence is the only operative currency to achieve justice and retribution.

No doubt a solution will require difficult political negotiations over borders, settlements, and security arrangements. But breaking the cycle of violence will also require a parallel process of human reconciliation – a dimension that has received far less international focus and support.

In that sense, many of the "root causes" of Hamas legitimacy and violence are the same root causes of Israeli violence directed at the Palestinians. Political grievances to be sure. But equally if not more so, the cycle of violence, pain, and loss that has allowed ideas of dehumanization and the justification of mistreatment to take root.

This article explores how reconciliation efforts are a critical circuit breaker to the cycle of violence and, therefore, a vital yet too often sidelined component of any lasting resolution to this conflict. Political solutions may address the structural dimensions, but they remain incomplete if the undercurrents of hatred continue to flow. Addressing political grievances without healing hearts will likely only redirect animosity to new channels of violence.

Through an examination of reconciliation through the psychological, strategic, historical, and practical lenses, this article seeks to shine a light on this neglected but vital dimension of peacebuilding, which coupled with traditional diplomatic and security approaches, might offer a path for both peoples out of the darkness.

II. If Not Now, When?

When is the right time to discuss reconciliation? An entirely reasonable response would be "not now." Indeed, the recent fighting has caused devastation and pain that is hard to fathom and that by many metrics eclipses other periods of active conflict between these two peoples. The Hamas attacks on October 7 marked the single greatest loss of Jewish life in a single day since the Holocaust, and Israel's relentless bombardment and blockade of Gaza has resulted in near complete devastation of that land, and the deaths of tens of thousands of Palestinians.

Political settlement seems as far off now as it has ever been. Palestinians and Israelis are weary from battle and loss and further entrenched in their anger and desire for revenge. President Netanyahu approved a proposal for complete annexation and remains completely disinterested in seeking peace, Hamas is weakened but not defeated, the Palestinian Authority is viewed as ineffective, and there are no other ascendant voices of moderation who possess realistic near or mid-term prospects for galvanizing support and leading Palestinians in a different direction.

It would be dishonest to suggest that reconciliation is anything less than excruciating. The wounds here are not metaphorical; they are literal, generational, and raw. Reconciliation can feel like surrender or betrayal. And forgiveness, if it is ever possible, may take lifetimes. That reaction is understandable.

But transformations often begin not with sweeping gestures, but with small cracks in the edifice of hatred, opened by those who have suffered most and still refuse to become what they hate. Indeed, transformative peace processes often emerge from the darkest moments of conflict. The Northern Ireland peace process gained momentum after some of the worst violence of the Troubles. South Africa's transition from apartheid began when the situation appeared most intractable. As hard as it is to fathom in the moment, as former Israel Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin reportedly said, "peace is not made between friends … it is made between enemies."

It is precisely when political solutions seem the farthest off, when both sides reach a "mutually hurting stalemate" where neither can win through force alone, that "moments of ripeness" for peace emerge.[3] Perhaps it is in their shared desperation that both parties can begin to take the first tentative steps together. And rather than focusing first on the political, geographic, and other realpolitik matters, perhaps basic principles of humanity can create new avenues and opportunities where none had previously existed.

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[3] I. William Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," in *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War*, ed. Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000), 225-250.

III. Do I Have a Voice? Do Any of Us Living in the Diaspora?

As a citizen and resident of the United States, I do not carry the burden held by those who live this conflict daily. I have neither stood under rocket fire nor had neighbors or immediate friends held hostage. And I have neither endured personal humiliation or administrative detention nor had to watch helplessly as bulldozers raze a school or home. Most of all, I have not had to bury a child.

My understanding of this tragedy comes not from lived trauma, but from study, reflection, proximity through community, and the ethical demands of shared identity and history. I write not to tell Israelis or Palestinians how to feel or what to forgive. How could I? How could anyone?

I write because I believe that diaspora voices, too, carry a moral responsibility. We all share in the obligation to resist the pull of tribal absolutism, to acknowledge the full humanity and suffering in our world, and to amplify the inspiration and message of those working toward peace, especially when they are hardest to hear.

I recognize that calls for reconciliation and mutual recognition can feel impossibly distant to those immersed in grief. It is not my place to prescribe healing. But I hope to inspire others to the view that choosing to humanize, even in the face of profound loss, is not a betrayal. It is a form of resistance against hatred, against despair, and against the kind of moral corrosion that has already exacted too high a toll on both peoples. To draw from a mentor and American Jewish leader, reconciliation, like forgiveness, is a step-by-step process and not a single event, requiring courage and a recommitment to our basic goodness. It is a process that allows (or even requires) an acknowledgement of legitimate pain as a step toward harnessing our strength to break the cycle of rage and violence.[4] From my position of relative safety, I offer these reflections not as answers, but as a contribution to a conversation that must belong to all of us, and one I enter with profound humility.

IV. The Cycle of Violence and Dehumanization

Violence between Israelis and Palestinians has created deep wells of trauma on both sides. The October 7th attacks left Israeli society deeply traumatized, reinforcing the belief that their security requires overwhelming military force. Its subsequent campaign in Gaza has traumatized Palestinians, reinforcing the belief

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[4] John Rosove, *Why Judaism Matters: Letters of a Liberal Rabbi to his Children and the Millennial Generation* (Nashville: Turner Publishing, 2017), 142.

that to earn their freedom, they must engage in armed resistance. Trauma justifies recrimination, and recrimination fuels dehumanization, which in turn makes further violence possible and even acceptable.

As philosopher David Livingston Smith explains, dehumanization serves as the psychological mechanism that enables ordinary people to commit extraordinary acts of cruelty.[5] By conceptualizing others as "subhuman," we circumvent the innate moral inhibitions that would otherwise prevent violence, creating "psychological distance" that morally justifies atrocities in the minds of its perpetrators. Each side is fighting the good fight, on the right side of history and the moral continuum in defending its people and setting the course for a better world. In the Israel-Palestinian context, this manifests through rhetoric characterizing the other as inherently violent, irrational, or undeserving of moral consideration.

This pattern is not unique but has defined other tragic chapters in human history.

In Rwanda, Hutu propaganda systematically labeled Tutsis as "cockroaches" through radio broadcasts and newspapers for years before the 1994 genocide, making the mass killing psychologically accessible to ordinary Hutus who had previously lived peacefully alongside their neighbors.[6] Over decades of conflict, "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland reinforced sectarian identities for Catholics and Protestants, sparking the development of separate educational systems, housing areas, and cultural institutions that propagated dehumanizing stereotypes.[7]

Likewise in Bosnia in the 1990s, the characterization by Serbian forces of Bosnian Muslims as "Turks" invoked centuries-old animosities to justify ethnic cleansing. The portrayal of Bosnian Muslims as extremists plotting genocide against Serbs created pre-emptive justification for violence.[8]

Such cycles can also arise in ethnically and religiously homogeneous populations, such as when the Khmer Rouge categorized their enemy, urbanites and intellectuals as "new people" who were corrupted by foreign influence.[9] Such labeling justified forced relocation and extermination in vast killing fields.

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[5] David Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), 78-92.

[6] Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 115-130.

[7] Ian McBride, "Ethnicity and Conflict: The Northern Ireland Troubles," *Journal of British Studies* 62, no. 3 (2023): 618-639, https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2023.45.

[8] Asude Eslem Sucu, "Unraveling the Complexities of the Bosnian War: A Narrative of Ethnic Cleansing and Human Tragedy," Academia.edu, 2024, https://www.academia.edu/116310049/Unraveling_the_Complexities_of_the_Bosnian_War_A_Narrative_of_Ethnic_Cleansing_and_Human_Tragedy.

[9] Donald Grasse, "State Terror and Long-Run Development: The Persistence of the Khmer Rouge," *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 1 (2024): 195-212.

Nazi propaganda depicted Jews as vermin, carriers of diseases, and master global manipulators.[10] From these framings, the Nazis were thoroughly convinced that they were doing good and moral work through efforts to purify the world. In the other direction too, dehumanizing rhetoric circulated within Stalin's Red Army, intent on encouraging Soviet troops to fight the Nazis' moral trepidation with assertions that German soldiers are "not human beings…if you kill one German, kill another – there is nothing more amusing for us than a heap of German corpses."[11]

And American slavery and the enduring legacies of racial division in the United States demonstrate powerfully the work of dehumanization to encode itself within systems and institutions, creating intergenerational trauma and persistent hierarchies that outlive their original context. "In America, a culture of cruelty crept into the minds, made violence and mockery seem mundane and amusing, built as it was into the games of chance at carnivals and country fairs well into the twentieth century."[12] So pervasive was this dehumanization of blacks in America that a favorite pastime for white children was to attend lynchings, argue over which of the victim's body parts they would claim as a souvenir, and send postcards of themselves, smiling ear to ear, to family and friends.[13]

The portrayal of Black Americans as less intelligent and more dangerous "justified the inhumanity of the past and the inequality of the present."[14] The legacy persists centuries after slavery's formal end.

What makes the Israel-Palestinian context particularly intractable is the layering of religious, historical, and national identities, creating a complex confluence of emotionally charged narratives used to justify continued violence. Each side's narrative contains elements that deny the other's legitimate connection to the land, peace and prosperity, or the right to self-determination.

The circle of impact, of course, widens far beyond the region itself. As I've observed previously, this conflict has caused people around the world to "take

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[10] Smith, *Less Than Human*, 45-67.

[11] Ilya Ehrenburg, quoted in *The Black Book: The Ruthless Murder of Jews by the Nazis*, compiled by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, translated by Moura Budberg (New York: Holocaust Library, 1981), 55.

[12] Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 182.

[13] The caption to an NAACP poster depicting the lynching in Florida of Rubin Stacy reads: "Do not look at the Negro…look at the seven WHITE children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle. Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly dressed seven-year-old girl on the right? Is the tiny four-year-old on the left old enough, one wonders, to comprehend the barbarism her elders have perpetrated?" NAACP poster caption depicting the lynching of Rubin Stacy in Florida (1935), NAACP Archives.

[14] Nikole Hannah-Jones, ed., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021), 12.

sides" on the issue, hardening hearts to justify the unjustifiable – racism and intolerance that further fuels the conflict.[15] Social media acts as an accelerant, its algorithms amplifying the most extreme voices and imagery, and demoting those of moderation. From this, I explained my worry that "the sound-biting of complex and emotionally charged issues, mixed with fear and ignorance, creates a dangerous petri dish for intolerance and racism to grow."[16] This digital ecosystem has made it increasingly difficult for moderate voices advocating for reconciliation to be heard above the crushing, pervasive, and seductive chorus of extremism.

This global polarization manifests in troubling ways, from antisemitic messaging being normalized in some quarters to anti-Palestinian racism proliferating in others. Those who shine a light on racism when they are its targets often remain blind to the racism emanating from within their own communities.[17] The moral failure here is profound, rendering individuals who would normally reject prejudice themselves engaging in dehumanizing rhetoric about "the other side," perpetuating the very cycles of hatred they claim to oppose.

These patterns of dehumanization are not merely historical accidents but reflect deep psychological tendencies to divide the world into "us" and "them." Indeed, this psychological instinct, known as the "minimal group paradigm," is so powerful that people will treat others differently (and unfairly and with hostility) based on completely arbitrary groupings.[18]

If arbitrary and meaningless categories can induce discrimination, it is hardly surprising to see aggressive acts of discrimination in the face of centuries of religious tradition, competing historical narratives, different languages, physical separation, intergenerational trauma, and economic disparities that map onto ethnic lines. For Israelis and Palestinians, there is nothing "minimal" about their group divisions. Differences in religion, history, language, and territory, formidable psychological forces, are weaponized by malicious actors for maximal division.

Coupled with Milgram's findings on obedience to authority and Zimbardo's insights on the ability of power to corrupt, Tajfel's work completes a troubling psychological triad: we are hard-wired to see the world through the lens

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[15] DJ Rosenthal, "Peace or Justice: Which Side Are You On?," *The Times of Israel*, July 17, 2024.

[16] DJ Rosenthal, "Let's Shine a Light on Racism Wherever We Find It," *The Baltimore Sun*, November 5, 2024.

[17] Rosenthal, "Let's Shine a Light on Racism."

[18] Henri Tajfel et al., "Social Categorization and Intergroup Behaviour," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 1, no. 2 (1971): 149-178.

of tribalism, working to defend our own tribe when it is perceived as being threatened, and using every opportunity to exert power over the "other," and we will too easily resort to mistreatment, violence, and even barbaric acts in response to exposure to even mild external social forces. These are not aberrations of human nature but fundamental aspects of it, waiting to be activated by the right circumstances.

The final step in this cycle of moral descent is the psychology of group violence, where harming the other becomes not just acceptable or justifiable but ingrained in group identity.[19] It then becomes part of a community-wide ethos; a culture where justified hatred and violence takes root.

And with that, the cycle carries forward to the next generation: Palestinian and Israeli children grow up not merely in different realities but in opposing ones, exposed to fundamentally contradictory shadows on their respective cave walls.

Breaking this cycle requires not just political solutions, but dedicated processes and wide-scale determination to restore recognition of the other's fundamental humanity. While daunting, there are powerful voices in the Israel-Palestinian conflict who are pursuing this path and setting an example for us all, and there are useful precedents from history of reconciliation out of the ashes of other intractable conflicts that themselves included perverse and inexcusable acts of depravity and violence.

V. Contradictions and the Problems of Binary Thinking

What makes this conflict uniquely complicated is the compounding forces of binary thinking that dominates this conflict. The good news, however, is that while conflicts deeply rooted in ideas (religious, ethnic, historic, political, and otherwise) present unique challenges (because the goals are often believed to be mutually exclusive), we collectively have the power to overcome them.

The Nature of Hamas. Since September 11, 2001, many in the U.S. and Israeli foreign policy communities have drawn parallels between Hamas and Al Qaeda, portraying both as Islamist fundamentalist movements bent on destroying liberal democracy and imposing a theocratic order rooted in religious extremism. There is truth to this comparison. Hamas's founding charter includes virulent antisemitic rhetoric and envisions Israel's destruction as a religious imperative. It is a death cult that draws its inspiration and moral justification from radical Islam, which has infected (and undermined) not just the Palestinian people but also, the Arab

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[19] Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide, Mass Killing, and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 85-110.

and non-Arab world more generally. Supporters of the Palestinian liberation movement largely ignore this reality to the detriment of their cause and prospects for the rights of self-determination and dignity that it seeks for the Palestinian people. They must continue to embrace the liberal humanist ideas of personal liberty and self-determination that they deserve, while rejecting the fundamentalism and violent ideologies that find their way into the mix, strip the cause of any moral authority, and undermine prospects for justice for the Palestinians.

At the same time, however, far too many supporters of Israel cling to this story to the exclusion of another piece of the puzzle. Critically and unlike Al Qaeda, Hamas is also a political and social movement embedded in Palestinian society, with much of its support stemming not from theological fervor, but from its ability to channel national aspirations for dignity, justice, and self-determination. It thus presents a contradiction, drawing its ideological fuel from a radical interpretation of Islam yet its oxygen from grievances rooted in secular and Enlightenment-derived values. Attempts to eliminate Hamas through military means alone, without recognizing and working sincerely to address these underlying liberal drivers of the cause, are doomed to fail.

The Indigenous People of Israel. Both Palestinians and Jews claim indigenous status to the land, yet binary thinking forces a false choice: one people must be indigenous, the other either colonialists or implants. Jews point to ancient biblical connections, archaeological evidence, and continuous if dispersed cultural ties spanning millennia. Palestinians emphasize unbroken habitation, agricultural rootedness, and generational connection to specific villages and olive groves. Each side's claim to indigeneity becomes a weapon to delegitimize the other's presence.

This framing obscures a more complex reality. Can a people maintain indigenous status across centuries of diaspora? Can a person born thousands of miles from the land assert a right to it because their ancestors, hundreds or thousands of years prior, may have lived there? Can continuous habitation trump ancient origins? When, if ever, do the spoils of war and conquest draw new lines of reality? The binary framework assumes these questions have definitive answers when they do not. More problematically, it transforms historical complexity into a zero-sum competition where one people's legitimacy requires the other's erasure.

The indigenous/colonial binary also imports frameworks from other conflicts that do not readily apply. Unlike European colonialism in the Americas or Africa, Jewish migration to Israel was a fulfillment of centuries-long and religiously based yearning for a return to the biblical land of the Israelites,

coupled with the imperative of fleeing from persecution. But whereas the long-preferred means for achieving this objective was rooted in passivity and faith in God (that God would make it so in his way and in his time), the establishment of the state of Israel used, as its means, modern political and military tactics that were the hallmarks of colonialism.

It is from the tactics used rather than the long-held ambitions of Jews in the diaspora, that many believe that Israel is the product of settler colonialism. This characterization provokes fierce debate and allegations that it reflects antisemitic roots. That very well may be the case. But it is also certainly the case that these characterizations are born from genuine grievances about land appropriation and the establishment of separate legal systems that favor one group over another.

But to focus on labels (particularly ones that have become lightning rods) is a distraction and an analytic trap. Liberation from it requires the courage to acknowledge competing claims to indigeneity of Israel, and a willingness to accept that both sets of claims contain strands of truth, and that both can coexist without negating each other.

The relevant takeaway: Both peoples have legitimate historical and cultural claims to the land, developed through different processes across different eras.

Is Israel a Democracy? It seeks to be. It proclaims that it is. But is it really? The American democratic experiment has been over 200 years in the making. While the term "democracy" does not appear in either the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, founding fathers such as Thomas Jefferson referred to "democratic principles" as a cornerstone of the new system of government they created. Yet just as science constitutes the *pursuit* of truth, not truth itself, the "democratic principles" encoded in the American system did not, and may still not, guarantee that America operates as the utopian democracy[20] so often portrayed throughout American iconography. Can a system rightly be called a democracy when an entire gender is denied the right to vote? How about during a large portion of that nation's history, when a sizable portion of its inhabitants are subjected to servitude and abject mistreatment, and denied the right to vote? How about when significant gains have been made to right those historic wrongs,

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[20] It is important to distinguish the technical "democracy" found in social science literature from the more majestic and idealistic conceptions of it that embody social identities. But regardless of the technical attributes of any specific democratic system, the provisioning of rights equally among all subjects and the ability to participate meaningfully in a process of self-government and determination – notwithstanding its many practical shortcomings – constitutes one of the most foundational of its hallmarks. For a comprehensive discussion of democratic theory, see Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

but when the vestiges of them remain powerful societal forces that continue to provide the most accurate (yet despicable and arbitrary) determiner of success, wealth, life expectancy, and incarceration rates?

These are difficult questions baked into the ongoing American story. And yet, its strength lies in its humble recognition that there is always more work to do. Believing it has always been perfect is to disclaim the pride that our forefathers and we deserve in always pushing forward. Our credo is to *seek* a more perfect union, not to naively believe that it has always been so.

And so it is with Israel too, with a contradiction hardwired into its foundation. The notion that Israel is a democracy is undermined by the stratified legal and social status of its inhabitants, where ethnicity constitutes the primary differentiator of status and opportunity. To be Jewish in Israel is to enjoy the full rights of citizenship and legal protection, and elite social status. To be Muslim or ethnically Arab (even Jewish Arab), is to possibly enjoy full citizenship, but more likely to exist within an ambiguous legal, political, and social purgatory depending on a complex amalgamation of ever-shifting factors, including the specific place where you were born or live, your heritage and religious upbringing, and other ad hoc and often trivial or irrational bases.

Correcting this incontestable democratic shortfall presents an as-yet unaddressed quagmire for Israel and the West. Indeed, because greater Israel has roughly equal numbers of Jews and Muslim Palestinians, converting Israel into a true democracy – where all its inhabitants have the right to vote and the other trappings of full citizenship – would mean the end of Israel as a "Jewish state." As Thomas Friedman observed, "ever since Israel occupied the West Bank and its Palestinian population in 1967, Israelis have faced a dilemma: Do they want a Jewish state, a democratic state and state in all of the land of Israel (Israel plus the West Bank)? In this world, they can have only two out of three. Israel can be Jewish and democratic, but not if it keeps the West Bank, because the Palestinians there plus all the Israeli Arabs will eventually outnumber the Jews. It can be Jewish and keep the West Bank, but then it can't be democratic; Arabs will be the majority. It can be democratic and keep the West Bank, but then it can't be Jewish."[21]

For some, the answer is easy. Adherence to liberalism and democracy means that the only tolerable moral and political solution is for Israel to become a multi-cultural democratic society where Jews, Muslim Arabs, and others have full rights of citizenship, including the right to vote. But for many Israelis and diaspora Jews and others, such an outcome betrays both a core geopolitical purpose of Israel (to

[21] Thomas L. Friedman, "Let's Fight Over a Big Plan," *New York Times*, March 16, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/17/opinion/17friedman.html.

establish a strong and independent nation state for the Jewish people out of the ashes of the Holocaust), and a religiously-mandated one (to fulfill god's designation of the Jewish people as the "chosen ones," gifted and entitled by god to the land of Israel).

The Culpability of Palestinian Civilians. Binary thinking can lead us to falsely choose black or white, when the truth is some version of grey. Though sometimes, there are only two possibilities. Such is the case with respect to the culpability of Palestinian civilians. One common narrative paints them as the victims of Hamas, which uses them as human shield. Another blames them for electing Hamas (no matter that approximately 80% of the residents of Gaza were either not yet born or too young to vote for Hamas in 2006; and given the closeness of the vote at the time, less than 10% of current residents of Gaza voted for Hamas).

Those ideas cannot coexist. Indeed, the barbarism of Hamas's use of human shields lies in the very fact that its victims are innocent civilians. But that truth seriously complicates the morality of large-scale military operations that have as their foreseeable outcome the elimination of both Hamas and the shield. It is true, of course, that the laws of war tolerate the foreseeable and causal deaths of civilians if the value of the military target is sufficiently high in proportion to the expected death toll. But modernity has not yet grappled with whether that legal principle can be plausibly extended to the intentional bombing of centers of civilian life (e.g., hospitals), even if militants use those centers as bases of operations. International Law lags, failing to identify an outer limit to the number of civilians that can be justifiably and foreseeably killed so long as the subjective, legalistic, and anodyne concepts of "excess" and "proportionality" are satisfied. It would be the height of tactical lunacy for a fighting force such as Hamas to conduct its operations out in the open, vulnerable to easy elimination by Israel's military. So, they hide among civilians in urban centers, like guerrilla fighters throughout history, to seek tactical military advantage where none would otherwise exist. And, in return, Israel targets them where it finds them, resulting in intolerable losses of civilian life.

Maybe Hamas bears responsibility for hiding among civilians. Maybe Israel does for dropping the bombs that kill them. Maybe we all do when we blame the innocent civilian shields for their own deaths.

Values-Based Intersectionality. Intersectionality seeks to understand the ways in which multiple forms of discrimination compound and interact. For example, a homosexual Muslim faces compounded opportunities for discrimination based on

the intersection of two potential "outgroup" associations. Separately, members of one minority group may feel solidarity with another group that is the subject of discrimination – here, an "intersection" between their experiences of discrimination creates connection.

Unfortunately, intersectionality has too often been reduced to a crude tribal scorecard that assigns permanent roles of victim and victimizer based on immutable characteristics. This distortion transforms a framework meant to expand moral imagination and provide pathways for empathy into yet another analytic trap that reinforces the very divisions it was designed to dismantle.

The October 7 attacks and their aftermath exposed this perversion in stark relief. Within hours of Hamas's assault, social media exploded with competing intersectional analyses. Progressives quickly positioned Palestinians as the ultimate oppressed group, viewing criticism of Hamas as tantamount to siding with colonial oppression. Conservative voices flipped the script entirely, positioning Jews as history's permanent victims and Palestinians as inherent aggressors, and dismissing Palestinian suffering as the inevitable consequence of aligning with barbarism and terrorism. Both frameworks reduced complex human realities to ideological litmus tests that make reconciliation impossible.

This shallow yet all-too-common intersectionality creates what amounts to a secular theology that sees people as either destined for salvation and protection or vilification and damnation, based exclusively on their group identity. It positions entire groups as inherently oppressive or inherently oppressed, ignoring the reality that within every community there are those who perpetuate harm and those who work for justice. There are Palestinians who support terrorism and Palestinians who dedicate their lives to peace. There are Israelis who dehumanize Palestinians and Israelis who risk their safety in the pursuit of Palestinian rights. There are Jews and Palestinians who weaponize victimization to silence criticism and there are those who courageously confront injustice within their own community. When intersectionality becomes a tool to judge people based on ethnicity rather than actions, it reinforces precisely the in-group/out-group thinking that perpetuates cycles of dehumanization.

This danger is not theoretical. All too often, intersectionality has fueled the very prejudices it claims to combat. Campus activists invoke intersectional frameworks to justify excluding Jewish students from progressive coalitions, because as these intersectionalists see it, Jewish identity is inherently aligned with oppression. Conversely, Jewish communities can fall into the trap of perpetual victimhood that allows for the dismissal of Palestinian suffering given their view that historical persecution of Jews trumps contemporary Palestinian grievances.

How unfortunate that a progressive sociological construct meant to allow people to *connect* based on shared experiences instead becomes yet another modern tool for people to *separate* further.

But intersectionality is not inherently retrograde. Indeed, true intersectionality is not about tribal loyalty or ideological conformity, but moral responsiveness to injustice wherever it appears. It calls us to recognize that any person or group can be aggressor or oppressed depending on context and circumstance, and that our ethical obligations transcend the accidents of birth or the boundaries of community.

Consider how this reframing illuminates the question I posed in an earlier article: "Which side are you on?" Intersectionality, properly understood, would have us ask not whether we stand with Israel or Palestine, but whether we stand with those who "prioritize their group's interests at the expense of others" or those "committed to peace and justice for all." The true divide runs not between ethnic groups but between those who embrace their shared humanity and those who succumb to tribal absolutism. That is the form of intersectionality I believe in; it is one that challenges both communities.

It challenges Jewish Americans to confront the reality that posting about how Israelis have won more Nobel Prizes than Palestinians or sharing images of Palestinians with their brains removed constitutes the same dehumanizing rhetoric historically directed at Jews. And it challenges Palestinians to acknowledge that celebrating October 7 as "resistance" employs the language of erasure they rightfully condemn when directed at them.

The distinction matters for reconciliation work. When intersectionality becomes a scorecard of suffering, it reinforces the walls reconciliation seeks to dismantle. Recall Pastor Martin Niemöller's famous warning:

> *First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out*
> *because I was not a socialist.*
> *Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out*
> *because I was not a trade unionist.*
> *Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out*
> *because I was not a Jew.*
> *Then they came for me*
> *and there was no one left to speak for me.*[22]

This quote is often cited as a cautionary tale about the spread of persecution. Yet for all its deserved praise, it is incomplete and hides a troubling implication – that the core motivation for us to speak out against injustice is because we are destined

[22] Martin Niemöller, "First They Came for the Socialists...," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed December 15, 2024, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoeller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists.

to be next. Niemöller's plea reduces moral action to self-interest.

A more complete moral framework is reflected in the sentiment often attributed to Edmond Burke that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." This construction demands action not from fear of future harm to ourselves, but from recognition that inaction in the face of injustice is itself morally wrong. We act not because we fear we will be next, but because, like us, those other people have intrinsic moral value and, as the religious would say, were likewise created in the image of God.

This prophetic intersectionality challenges every community to examine its capacity for dehumanization while maintaining solidarity with all who suffer injustice. It asks American Jews to confront anti-Palestinian racism within their communities while demanding others confront antisemitism within theirs. It insists that our response to historical persecution should not be tribal self-protection but expanded moral imagination, where we elevate the cries of "never again" from a pledge to protect Jews alone into a universal commitment that no people should face systematic dehumanization.

We should all have the capacity and moral strength to recognize that Hamas's actions on October 7 were crimes against humanity while acknowledging that, in its response, Israel has killed far too many Palestinian civilians. We can affirm that Israelis have a right to live in peace while acknowledging that it has long deprived the Palestinians of dignity. We can affirm the right of the Palestinians to self-determination while condemning violence and terrorism. This is not moral equivalence but moral maturity; a turning away from binary thinking toward the complex realities of our world.

Through the intersection of shared values and shared experiences, for example, parents whose children were killed in this conflict find themselves in kinship over shared tragedy. Their coming together does not erase ethnic differences or paper over suffering, but it offers a way for empathy to displace rage and lust for retribution. This is "human intersection" not based on group loyalty or tribal alliances but based on shared universal principles. And it is the intersectionality that serves reconciliation rather than sectarianism, that builds bridges rather than reinforcing walls, and that honors the complexity of human experience rather than reducing them to competing narratives of victims and oppressors. It offers not the false comfort of moral simplicity but the difficult wisdom of moral growth. It is an intersectionality worthy of our highest ethical traditions, and a vital ingredient for the reconciliation this conflict desperately needs.

Criticism of Israel and Antisemitism. The conflation of criticism of Israeli policies with antisemitism is both politically charged and intellectually corrosive. It serves neither the fight against antisemitism nor the cause of justice in the Middle East, yet it has become a reflexive response that stifles legitimate debate and undermines both.

Antisemitism is real, rising, and dangerous. Indeed, while Jews make up less than 2.4% of the American population, they were the victims of a staggering 67% of all religious-based hate crimes in 2023, the highest number ever recorded by the FBI.[23] The questions that "remain dormant until the cancers of intolerance, hatred and violence shatter our collective sense of security" have returned with a vengeance: "Am I, as a Jew, safe in this land that I call home? What steps must I take to protect my family?" These fears are not abstract but constitute lived realities for Jewish communities worldwide, from synagogue shootings to campus harassment to the normalization of antisemitic tropes in political discourse.

Yet equating any criticism of Israeli policies with antisemitism creates a moral hazard that undermines both Jewish security and Israeli interests. The reflexive labeling of legitimate concerns about settlement expansion, military tactics, or human rights violations as antisemitism cheapens the meaning of antisemitism itself.

Moreover, this conflation provides cover for actual antisemites who can point to the overuse of the label to dismiss legitimate concerns about their rhetoric. It also creates what amounts to a speech code that makes honest discourse about Israeli policies nearly impossible in many contexts, driving criticism underground where it can indeed merge with antisemitic sentiment.

The reverse is equally true: the tendency to dismiss all accusations of antisemitism as attempts to silence criticism creates blind spots to real antisemitic sentiment that often masquerades as political critique. When criticism of Israeli policies employs classical antisemitic tropes about Jewish power and manipulation, the line from political critique to antisemitism has been crossed.

The binary thinking here prevents recognition that robust criticism of Israeli policies can coexist with vigilant opposition to antisemitism. They must coexist. As I have argued, "we must have the courage to call out human rights violations wherever and whenever they occur, regardless of who is claimed to be responsible."[24] This principle applies with particular force to those of us in the Jewish community who have both the moral authority and the responsibility to distinguish between legitimate policy criticism and antisemitic hatred.

Ultimately, the conflation of criticism of Israel and its actions with

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[23] FBI 2023 Hate Crimes Statistics, released September 2024.

[24] Rosenthal, "Peace or Justice."

antisemitism may pose the greatest long-term threat to both Jewish security and Israel's survival. By making honest conversation about Israeli policies taboo, we silence the self-reflection and course correction that democracies require to remain healthy. It alienates potential allies who support both Jewish security and Palestinian rights, and it provides ammunition to those who would use Israeli policies to justify antisemitism and violence directed at Jews worldwide. The failure to maintain this distinction serves neither Jewish interests nor the cause of justice. It instead only serves those who benefit from the perpetuation of conflict and the impossibility of nuanced discourse.

The Moral High Ground and Approbation. Those who shine the brightest light on injustice when directed at their own community often fall conspicuously silent when similar injustices emanate from within their ranks. As I have written previously, "so many who shine the light on racism when they are the objects of it from others are blind to the racism that emanates from within their own community, where it is dismissed, rationalized or ignored."[25]

This selective moral vision reveals itself in predictable patterns. When Israeli civilians are killed, we rightfully hear condemnation of terrorism and calls for justice. When Palestinian civilians are killed, we hear explanations about military necessity and the complexities of urban warfare. The reverse is equally true: when Palestinian suffering dominates headlines, we hear passionate calls for human rights and international law, but when Israeli families bury their children, the same voices often retreat into geopolitical analysis.

The most powerful voices for justice are those that transcend ethnic loyalty – not because they lack identity or connection, but because they refuse to let tribal allegiance blind them to universal principles. When we speak against injustice only when it serves our group's interests, we reveal that our commitment is not to justice itself, but to the advancement of our tribe. True moral authority comes from those willing to challenge wrongdoing regardless of who perpetrates it, understanding that our credibility in calling out the other side's violations depends entirely on our willingness to confront our own.

This is not mere moral equivalence. Scale, context, and the nature of different acts matter enormously. But the principle remains: if we have "generated, liked or otherwise shared such messaging," we must "do and be better" and "do our part in repairing the world." Only then can we reclaim the moral high ground necessary to demand better from others.

Having cleared away the dense underbrush that often clouds moral clarity in this arena, we can now proceed to the moral and emotional precursors to peace.

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[25] Rosenthal, "Let's Shine a Light on Racism."

VI. Choosing Sides: Beyond Ethnic Identity

In analyzing the Israel-Palestinian conflict, I've previously argued that "the more meaningful and productive framing is not based on which ethnic team you align with, but the values that lie at the core of your position."[26] This insight becomes particularly crucial when considering reconciliation. The question is not whether you stand with Israel or the Palestinians, but whether you stand for universal human values that transcend tribal allegiances.

To do so, we must "imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies." To elevate our thinking beyond the territorial, religious, or ethnic, and conceive of ourselves as part of a larger human story.[27] Doing so allows us to expand our aperture, beyond what social media and our friendship and family circles would have us envision, beyond the immediate wounds of conflict, and toward a different kind of future, where inhabitants of that contested land orient themselves toward healing rather than harm. Where both peoples reestablish ancient connection with one another and to the land, through shared roots in the olive groves, and where the power of healing and forgiveness manifests when the sunflowers turn from darkness and toward the light.[28]

Indeed, in his famous essay "The Sunflower," Simon Wiesenthal confronts a dying Nazi seeking absolution, but ultimately withholds forgiveness, a decision that haunts Wiesenthal throughout his life. His silence in that moment, coupled with his lifelong ambivalence as to the decision he made, calls on us to consider whether forgiveness is possible in the face of atrocities. It haunts us to the insufferable difficulty of forgiveness in the face of profound moral injury. Yet it simultaneously suggests a deeper yearning for forgiveness that may be essential, not just for the perpetrator, but for the victim as well, to reclaim their future from the shadow of the past. Wiesenthal compels us to engage with this question for ourselves, because how we respond can shape our capacity to heal and build a more humane world.

The choice is theirs (and ours in the diaspora). We can continue to frame the Israel-Palestinian conflict as an intractable and biblical struggle between two sides with mutually exclusive claims. Often favored by politicians and other constituents with their own interests, this framing obscures a more fundamental truth: there are people of conscience on both sides who recognize the humanity of the other and who are committed to finding a way forward that honors both peoples'

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[26] Rosenthal, "Peace or Justice."

[27] John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 142.

[28] Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, rev. ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1998).

legitimate needs and aspirations.

It is these individuals who best embody the highest values within their respective traditions, whether it's the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) or the Islamic emphasis on *rahma* (compassion and forgiveness) and *adl* (justice and fairness). And it is their voices that we must hear, and their example that we must follow.

VII. Seeds Among the Ruins: Reconciliation Through Shared Loss

The separation between Israelis and Palestinians transcends physical barriers, deeply embedding itself in hearts and minds.[29] While political negotiations have dominated headlines, numerous grassroots organizations have quietly worked toward reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. These efforts remain marginalized in the broader peace process, yet their impact on participants can be profound. The power of their example can motivate others to pursue a similar path. Out of a cycle of violence can emerge counterrevolutionary cycles of peace, healing, and reconciliation.

Some of the most powerful examples come from Palestinians and Israelis who tragically share the deepest of wounds – those who have lost family members to the violence. Rami Elhanan, an Israeli whose daughter Smadar was killed in a suicide bombing, and Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian whose daughter Abir was killed by Israeli border police, have transformed their unimaginable grief into a shared mission for peace. These two fathers, united by the worst tragedy parents can endure, travel together speaking about reconciliation and their refusal to seek vengeance. Arman believes that "[y]ou will never heal [but] it's up to you to make a choice. Invest in hatred and revenge and suffer again from sad circumstances. Or look forward to the future and try to use this pain as a power to create more bridges instead of more graves."[30]

Equally powerful is the work of Aziz Abu Sarah, a Palestinian who initially turned to extremism after his brother was killed by Israeli soldiers. Abu Sarah preaches the power of hope and reconciliation, and powerfully joined forces with Maoz Inon, whose parents were killed by Hamas on October 7, 2023, to serve as a model for us all. To be sure, one is a Palestinian and one is an Israeli. Both have

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[29] Mark Braverman, *Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews, and the Search for Peace in the Holy Land* (Austin: Synergy Books, 2010), 78.

[30] "'Circle of Blood' The Club No Israeli or Palestinian Wants to Be In. Yet, They Urge Peace". *USA Today,* November 3, 2023.

deep pain and legitimate grievances over the senseless deaths of their loved ones. But both are on the same side – the side of humanity and peace.[31]

These stories exemplify what is possible when people choose to be on the side of "those who share a commitment to honest and respectful dialogue and understanding, and a core commitment to peace and justice for all."[32] These transformative journeys mirror the path taken by organizations like Parents Circle-Families Forum, which unites Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost loved ones to the conflict, Combatants for Peace, which brings together former fighters who have renounced violence, and Seeds of Peace, which operates worldwide to bring people together to operate in solidarity to bridge cultural divides, end cycles of anger and blame, and work toward a more just world.

The methodology developed by these organizations typically involves creating safe spaces for honest dialogue and building relationships that transcend political positions. Or, like the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, they create a place for Palestinian and Israeli teens to connect over the universal language of music. First through the power of song, they cultivate their shared humanity and roots, and through that work, grow respect and understand, then deep connection and love.

Another powerful example is the story of the creation of the textbook "Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine."[33] A joint project of Palestinian and Israeli historians, the team set out to develop a single narrative of the story of the land of Israel. But when they realized that no such single narrative was possible, they opted instead to create "Parallel Histories" a literal side by side narration of key historical events from Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. In some areas, the stories on the left and right pages bear passing resemblance; in others the accounts differ vastly. But the important lesson is not in proving one correct at the expense of the other.

Reconciliation does not require a single shared narrative, which is impossible. It requires a far humbler openness to mutual recognition of different experiences of the same events, and the legitimate feelings and perspectives borne of those divergent narratives. Liberation from conflict exists when we can accept the truth of both narratives.

Psychology confirms what these organizations have discovered through practice. The "contact hypothesis" suggests that under the right conditions, interpersonal contact between members of hostile groups can reduce prejudice.[34]

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[31] "A Palestinian and an Israeli, Face to Face," TED Talk, 2024, https://www.ted.com/talks/aziz_abu_sarah_and_maoz_inon_a_palestinian_and_an_israeli_face_to_face.

[32] Rosenthal, "Peace or Justice."

[33] Sami Adwan and Dan Bar-On, eds., *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

[34] Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

As is to be expected, conditions such as equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support, matter enormously in predicting the outcome of these contacts.

Muzafer Sherif's Robbers Cave experiment dramatically illustrated these principles. Arbitrary groups of boys at a summer camp immediately exemplified the "minimal group paradigm." But when facing shared challenges, first cooperation and then friendship and trust replace hostility across group lines.[35]

This partly explains the successes of efforts such as Parents Circle, Combatants for Peace, the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, and the Side-by-Side project. They meet all the conditions of the "contact hypothesis" – members share equal status (in grief, renunciation of violence, artistic expression, or scholarly inquiry), work toward common goals, engage in genuine cooperation, and create institutional structures supporting continued contact.

What we know instinctively about the transcendent power of individualized human connection is confirmed in these microcosms of hope for a better tomorrow. Profound transformations are underway. Seemingly fortified walls of "otherness" crumble in the face of shared humanity. When a Palestinian mother and an Israeli mother sit together in their grief, when former fighters commit to the shared pursuit of peace, when teenagers use music to harmonize across division, when historians acknowledge parallel truths. It is in such moments of human strength and resilience that our deeper instincts for love, compassion, and connection override the learned hatred of tribalism.

Among the olive groves of Israel, besieged by centuries of conflict, these initiatives plant seeds of understanding that may yet develop into reconciliation. Core ingredients of reconciliation are relationships of trust and cooperation that enable people to create a future together in peace.[36] But achieving this at scale requires moving reconciliation work from the margins to the mainstream.

VIII. Strategic Reconciliation

Transforming reconciliation to a central component of peace requires fundamental shifts across multiple domains. History demonstrates that sustainable peace emerges not from military victory alone, but from addressing the psychological

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[35] Muzafer Sherif et al., *Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers Cave Experiment* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Book Exchange, 1961).

[36] John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 89.

and relational dimensions that perpetuate conflict. And it shows that reconciliation is achievable not just at the individual and local community levels, but on national levels as well.

Other seemingly intractable conflicts offer instructive lessons. Rwanda's post-genocide reconciliation through community-based Gacaca courts demonstrated that accountability and relationship restoration can coexist. The courts embodied Allport's principles by bringing perpetrators and victims together as equals before the community, working toward the shared goal of truth and healing. The accomplishment here is as hard to fathom as it is remarkable given that the Hutus systematically hunted and killed Tutsis at a faster rate than the Nazis killed the Jews.[37]

Others too found a path forward. Northern Ireland's peace emerged not just from the Good Friday Agreement, but from decades of grassroots reconciliation work that gradually transformed sectarian hostilities into dialogue and, ultimately, caring and productive relationships. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, despite its limitations, created space for national acknowledgment of past wrongs and healing.

These successful reconciliation efforts illustrate the psychological transformation from Tajfel's in-group bias to Allport's conditions for positive contact. In each case, societies had to create structures that overcame tribal divisions through equal-status encounters and superordinate goals. They reveal that reconciliation can be highly effective when incorporated into multiple levels of peace and reform efforts, including negotiations, institutional reform, and grassroots relationship building. The Ireland experience particularly underscores that political agreements merely create the opportunity for resolution, which nevertheless requires reconciliation.

Almost exclusively, all prior efforts to resolve the Israel-Palestinian conflict have sought to do so through the lenses of geopolitics, military operations, and diplomacy. But as military leaders from General Petraeus to Sir Gerald Templer witnessed in fighting counterinsurgencies, purely kinetic approaches are doomed to fail without equal devotion to take steps to address underlying grievances.

Furthermore, the path out of cycles of violence and military conflict is not more violence given its self-perpetuating nature – death fueling higher levels of hurt, anger, and an insatiable need for retribution. "An operation that kills five insurgents is counterproductive if collateral damage leads to the recruitment of fifty more."[38]

These insights apply directly to the current situation. Israel's objective to

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[37] Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You*, 45-60.

[38] Batya Ungar-Sargon, "What David Petraeus Can Teach Us About Gaza," *Tablet*, July 24, 2014, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/what-david-petraeus-can-teach-us-about-gaza.

eliminate Hamas cannot succeed through military means alone while the root causes that enable extremist recruitment remain unaddressed. Similarly, Palestinian aspirations for justice cannot be achieved through violence that only deepens Israeli security concerns and hardens hearts.

Effective reconciliation requires coordinated action across multiple sectors. With respect to security, the parties must move beyond the traditional security dilemma where one side's safety requires the other's insecurity. This means developing cooperative security arrangements and trust-building measures that address Israeli fears while respecting Palestinian dignity and advancing their human right to self-determination.

On the economic front, the international community must encourage interdependence through joint economic projects that give both peoples stakes in each other's prosperity. The World Bank has demonstrated how economic cooperation can create constituencies for peace, and it must be empowered to leverage its experiences elsewhere in the world to help the Israelis and Palestinians.

In both Israel and the Palestinian territories, children must be freed from the indoctrination of dehumanization, perhaps through programming modeled from the "Side by Side" textbook, to provide space for children to understand competing narratives and to empathize with different experiences of the same history. Educational initiatives must work constantly to counteract the power of minimal group dynamics, teaching children to recognize and resist the psychological manipulation that transforms difference into hatred.

Religious leaders must do more given the strong religious dimensions to this conflict. Whereas religion has served as an aggravating factor for both Israelis and Palestinians alike to justify the biblical righteousness of their cause, both Judaism and Islam have the capability to offer paths to peace and healing. The moral authority of religious leaders must be deployed to amplify theological interpretations that support coexistence rather than conflict. Religious frameworks that balance justice with forgiveness are essential for communities where faith remains a central aspect of identity. Organizations like the Alliance for Middle East Peace have developed methodologies for engaging religious leaders in reconciliation work that respects theological traditions while opening space for peaceful coexistence.

Support for development of civil society is vital too, to create "islands of civility" where alternative forms of interaction can develop. Groups like Parents Circle-Families Forum and Combatants for Peace demonstrate how shared trauma can become a foundation for reconciliation rather than revenge.

And finally, the international community must move beyond traditional mediation to actively support an infrastructure of reconciliation. Reconciliation must be integrated into the diplomatic dialogue, and long-term funding must be made available to support and amplify person-to-person initiatives that cultivate real and sustainable relationships. Moreover, we must abandon the urge to define and declare success upon the signing of a peace agreement. True reconciliation will take much longer to take root, and the international community must sustain its commitment over the long term.

From a national security perspective, unresolved trauma and grievance pose long-term strategic threats that cannot be addressed through military means alone. As I observed in my capacity as director for counterterrorism at the National Security Council, sustainable security requires addressing the conditions that give rise to extremism and violence. Where the core of a conflict incorporates elements of fundamental human needs for identity, security, and/or recognition (as this one does), the failure to integrate reconciliation into security frameworks dooms any attempts at peace to failure.[39]

IX. Which Side Are You On?

The path toward sustainable peace between Israelis and Palestinians requires both political solutions and human reconciliation. It is true that reconciliation efforts without political frameworks for justice and security lack the necessary conditions to flourish. But it is equally true that political agreements that fail to address the psychological and emotional dimensions of conflict lack anchoring in the bedrock of the hearts and minds of the people who must live with, promote, and enforce them.

Ultimately, the question I posed in an earlier article remains central: "Which side are you on?" Are you on the side of those “whose hearts have been hardened by legitimate and relentless grievances and loss, and who have succumbed to anger and the thirst for reprisal?” Or do you stand with those who possess “the humanity to recognize the legitimate fears, historic claims and grievances, and hopes of Israelis and Palestinians alike?”

As I wrote, both peoples “have rich histories and strong ties to the land, and both want to live in peace with [their] neighbors.” Achieving this peace requires moving beyond the cycle of violence, recrimination, and dehumanization that has ensnared generations. It requires “moral imagination” to envision new relationships with old enemies.

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[39] John Burton, *Conflict: Resolution and Prevention* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 156-172.

This is not naive idealism but rather the most realistic path forward. The alternative is endless conflict, regional instability, and continued suffering. It has been tested time and again, and leads nowhere.

The olive groves that stretch across this contested land have witnessed centuries of conflict, yet its branches continue to bear fruit. Sunflowers turn their faces toward the light even amid destruction. These enduring symbols of peace and resilience remind us that different traditions can thrive in proximity without threatening one another, and that peace can take root only where olives and sunflowers grow – not just in the soil, but in the hearts of those who choose healing over hatred.

It is relatively easy to retroactively assess historical conflict and situate oneself on the side deemed most just and moral through the lens of hindsight. This propensity for moral clarity when looking in the rear-view mirror suggests that future generations will look back with disbelief at our tolerance for dehumanization and violence that is widely rationalized in our time through tribal allegiances.

When reconciliation eventually takes hold, as it must if both peoples are to flourish, many will rewrite their own positions, claiming they stood against hatred all along. Indeed, I have no doubt that "one day, everyone will have always been against this."[40] The challenge is to summon that future moral clarity now. To stand against dehumanization before history renders its judgment, and to insist that we start on the path to that future now.

Without diminishing the importance of finding political solutions to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, it is time to elevate reconciliation work from the margins to the mainstream, recognizing that sustainable peace requires transforming relationships as well as redrawing borders. Only then can Israelis and Palestinians truly flourish in a land where ancient roots sustain new growth, and where former enemies turn together toward a brighter horizon.

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[40] Omar El Akkad, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2024).