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Israeli recounts efforts for grass-roots dialogue with Palestinians

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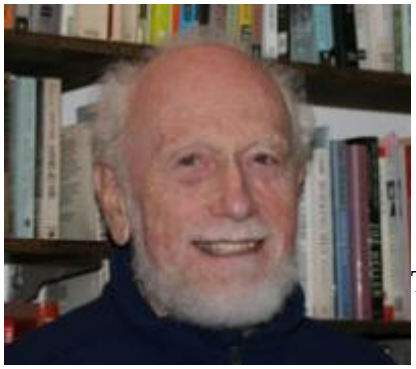
A ZIONIST AMONG PALESTINIANS
By Hillel Bardin
Published by Indiana University Press, $29

I am an American Jew, a Zionist (defined as one who believes that the Jews have a right to a homeland in Israel), a member of the Conservative Jewish movement (in practice somewhere in the vast middle between the liberal Reform Jewish movement and the very traditional Orthodox movement), and a believer in the right of the Palestinians to their own sovereign state on the West Bank. Safety and security are imperatives for both Palestinians and Israelis if either entity is to succeed. The question of where to draw the boundary lines becomes the paramount issue.



Those are some of my prejudices. Having identified these (others may become obvious), it is time to consider those of Hillel Bardin, author of *A Zionist Among Palestinians*. Bardin was raised in the United States until he was 30 years old, whereupon he returned to Israel, the land of his birth. While serving in the Israeli Army Reserves he became interested in the Palestinians and their subservient condition under the oppressive Israeli government. This book is the story of his journey through many episodes of developing techniques, venues and strategies to facilitate dialogue between Palestinians and liberal-minded Israelis. The Israeli infrastructure, as described in the book, is systemically designed to frustrate and stifle such peaceful attempts to open up lines of discussion and begin attempts to find common ground between Palestinians and Israeli citizens.

Bardin?s stated objectives (and those of his many like-minded Israeli dialoguers) can be boiled down to three principles: peace; security for the state of Israel; and safety, security and sovereignty for the Palestinians in the form of a two-state solution.

A Zionist Among Palestinians is written as if the author was writing his own personal diary with the intent that it should be read by others, as opposed to, say, a diary written by my granddaughter that is kept locked and intended to be read only by her. Almost as if it were a documentary for PBS, the author makes only a small effort to develop his real-life characters. The people in the book, both Israeli and Palestinian, remain faceless actors, virtually incapable of gesture or expression. As in a documentary, there is no plot, only the chronological retelling of the author?s efforts, with great success, to develop dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis at the

local level. Unquestionably, the dangers for the individuals from each side were and remain dramatically real. This rapprochement story was, and is, being played out in real life in dozens of places throughout the areas of contention on the West Bank and in Israel.

The diary/documentary begins at the time of the first intifada in 1987 (which lasted until 1993 and the Oslo Accords) and includes Bardin?s arrest (while on active duty as an army reservist) for the crime of meeting with Palestinians while in uniform. Keep in mind that in the 1980s the ?two-state solution? was not a popular idea with the Israeli army, government or most of the citizenry. Bardin has spent the past quarter century in a continuing effort to open up avenues of dialogue between like-minded Israelis and peace-seeking Palestinians. There unfurls in this process a growing, legitimate respect and admiration for the peace-loving, socially and culturally respectful, and intelligent Palestinian people -- people who had been vilified, demonized and demeaned by the Israeli government and army and much of the Israeli media. In Bardin?s book there ensues an eye-opening process, repeated at numerous times and places, of Israelis coming to grips with a more realistic understanding of the ?other? that the Palestinians had been portrayed as. The reverse process of respect for Israelis also occurred within the group of Palestinians involved in the opening of the dialogue process.

The book is the self-told story of one very brave and determined man?s quixotic journey. Bardin sees the occupation of the West Bank as a moral and ethical issue that needs to be dealt with nonviolently through community action. Marches, walks, protests, signs on buildings, meetings, dialogue and peaceful resistance are the tools that he has used and continues to promote. Perhaps the only glaring shortcomings are that Bardin fails to incorporate a more complete telling of the realities of the larger world (from 1987 to the present) and gives minimal attention to the history of the area that led up to the first intifada. An assessment of the geopolitical shifts in Israel and the world, and their corresponding effects at the local level, would have given perspective to the events on the ground. The changing economic realities, educational possibilities and vocational opportunities all could have been woven into the fabric of the book.

Neglected is the issue of compensation on both sides for the turmoil of the past 75 years. As it has been for thousands of years, one crux of the problem is territory (not only acreage and buildings, but ?territory? in the sense of religious tradition, the sense of nationhood). The co-crux is wealth (compensation for appropriated land, businesses and finances). For the record, it is easily arguable that the number of Jews displaced from *all* Arab lands in the past 75 years is not significantly less than the number of Palestinians displaced. The compensation issue (monetary and otherwise) is similar. The major historical difference is that Israel received and welcomed Jewish refugees from Arab lands, whereas other Arab countries shunned the Palestinians, who have been kept (tens of thousands to this day) in long-term refugee camps.

Yes, peaceful negotiations as a result of dialogue are the logical and effective alternative to a continuing series of military altercations. And, yes, as a panoramic view of such peace efforts by citizens on the ground during this turbulent period, Bardin?s book allows the reader some wonderful insights.

[Allen Coven is a retired businessman and a current student in the Graduate School of the Baltimore Hebrew Institute, a division of Towson University in Maryland.]

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