

A Palestinian Responds to His Israeli Neighbor



A woman looks out at the Palestinian village of Al-Z'aim, and beyond that Maale Adumim, an Israeli settlement on the eastern outskirts of Jerusalem. Credit: Rina Castelnovo for The New York Times

By Raja Shehadeh Aug. 24, 2018

LETTERS TO MY PALESTINIAN NEIGHBOR

By Yossi Klein Halevi

204 pp. Harper/HarperCollins Publishers. \$24.99.

Dear Yossi,

It has always been my belief that it's important to engage and understand the other in our ongoing struggles in Israel and Palestine. That is why I was encouraged when I received your book and read the title: "Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor."

From the outset you make it clear that your book, told in a series of 10 letters to a hypothetical Palestinian correspondent, tells your own story: that of a New York Jew who grew up in the right-wing Zionist youth movement Betar, and who then decided in the summer of 1982, during the Lebanon War, to, as you put it, join the Jewish people "in the greatest dare of its history."

After living for 36 years in your adopted country, you write (still addressing your imagined Palestinian audience), you believe that the greatest challenge facing your generation of Israelis is “to turn outward — to you, neighbor, because my future is inseparable from yours.” Later you add: “What choice do we have but to share this land?” It is in that spirit that you say you undertook writing these missives, to embark “on a journey of listening to each other.”

I find this an admirable goal. But reading your words, I wonder how aware you are of what our feelings are on the other side. Though you do at least acknowledge that there is a Palestinian “counterstory,” one of “invasion, occupation and expulsion,” a history of “dislocation” and “humiliating defeats,” the sentiment you most express, again and again in your letters, is how deeply we, the Palestinians, misunderstand *you*. It is our ignorance of your history and religion and attachment to the land that you seek to correct here.

Over the years I myself have made serious attempts to come closer to my Israeli neighbors, to form friendships and appreciate their worldviews, and many of my books have been translated and published in Israel. Yet in reading your letters I couldn't help feeling condescended to — an unfortunate reaction since I am, I believe, your intended interlocutor. In one of your letters you wonder how your people can “empower” mine. But it seems the wrong question when all most of us wish is for Israel to withdraw from the territories it has occupied and leave us to go on with our lives.

It also doesn't help that while claiming a new understanding of and sensitivity to our plight, you rehearse old and discredited narratives, like the suggestion that the land of Palestine was empty before Zionists arrived or the notion that it was Israel that has constantly offered peace, which the Palestinians have persisted in rejecting. (I was involved in the Oslo negotiations and I can tell you that Israel shares plenty of responsibility for their failure.)

Your letters seem like an intellectual exercise, which is a privilege that you enjoy but we do not. “If you were in my place, neighbor, what would you do?” you ask. But we are not in your place. You present the central problem of the conflict as a “cycle of denial,” in which my side is denying yours “legitimacy,” not sufficiently acknowledging “Jewish peoplehood,” and yours is denying mine “national sovereignty.” But these things are not equivalent. Twenty percent of the population of Israel proper are Palestinians who are often treated as second-class citizens. And the almost five million Palestinians, like me, who live in the territories that Israel occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem, have been living for the past half century under the grueling regime of the occupation. These are actual realities, ones that only one side has the power to change.

To make peace possible the Palestinians are not required to become Zionists, to embrace the narrative of Jewish suffering and redemption that you recount in your letters. That you insist on this point as a prerequisite for peace makes me wonder how serious you are about sharing the land and reaching out to your neighbors.

Unlike you I will not demand that you see the Nakba, the catastrophe that Israel's founding caused for my people, in the same way as I see it. You couldn't. Suffice it for you to recognize your responsibility and to put a recognition of that culpability on the agenda for negotiations when the time comes for arriving at a settlement between us.

Many of your arguments are couched in religious terms about the inextricability of Zionism from Judaism. But ours is not a religious war. It's a conflict between two nationalities in which one of these, Israel, makes it physically impossible for the other, Palestine, to exercise a right to self-determination. "The purpose of Judaism," as you see it, "is to sanctify one people with the goal of sanctifying all people." The Palestinians don't need to be sanctified by Israel. We simply want the right to control our fate, a desire I know you must understand well from studying Jewish history.

I agree with you that peace can come only if we succeed in sharing this land and living on it with justice and fairness for both nations. And I will forever agree with your sentiment that the "violence, suppression, rage, despair" that characterizes our relationship must end. But perhaps the problem with your letters is that they don't read as if they are seeking an answer, hoping for that Palestinian neighbor — me — to respond, but instead seem like lectures, half a conversation with a partner who is expected to stay quiet and listen.

Sincerely,

Raja

Raja Shehadeh is the author, most recently, of "Where the Line Is Drawn: A Tale of Crossings, Friendships, and Fifty Years of Occupation in Israel-Palestine."