

About a silent exile*

David Meghnagi**

Abstract. The author was born and raised in an Arab country that he left forever after a bloody pogrom, the third in the history of his family in just over twenty years. Over the course of two decades, between fifties and sixties, hundreds of thousands of Jews were forced to abandon their homes and possessions in every part of the Arab and Islamic world. The Jewish minorities had not participated in the war of destruction waged by the armies of the Arab League against the nascent State of Israel and were of no danger to anyone. They were in fact hostages. Their escape was a silent one, ignored by the international press. When the Jews disappeared from the Arab world, it was the turn of the remains of the ancient civilizations that had populated the Near East before the Arab invasions. Only recently has the enormous symbolic value for a more balanced vision of the conflict begun to be understood. Remembering the suffering of Jews in the Arab countries is a healthy reminder of the complexity of the problems and of reality. If one accepts that they too are an element of the complex and multi-faceted Middle Eastern mosaic, things appear in a different light.

Keywords: Antisemitism, Exile, State of Israel, Jewish refugees from Arabic Land, Palestinians refugees, Pogrom.

«The tongue has the power of life and death» (*Book of Proverbs*, 18, 21)

«I wish to express the confidence that you will never do or say anything – an author’s words, after all, are deeds – that is cowardly or base, and that even at a time which blurs judgement you will choose the right way and show it to others» (Letter from Sigmund Freud to Thomas Mann, June 6, 1935)

“Even at a time which blurs judgement” – wrote Freud in a letter to Thomas Mann – “an author’s words are deeds”. Fortunately, those times are behind us¹. The warning however is still valid. The world today is overfull with danger. We cannot let down our guard before the “sick” words that surround the debate on the Arab-Israeli conflict. And sick words need treatment, just like people.

I was born and raised in an Arab country that I left forever after a bloody pogrom, the third in the history of my family in just over twenty years. Over the course of two decades, hundreds of thousands of Jews were forced to abandon their homes and possessions in every part of the Arab and Islamic world.

The Jewish minorities had not participated in the war of destruction waged by the armies of the Arab League against the nascent State of Israel and were of no danger to anyone. They were in fact hostages. Their escape was a silent one, ignored by the international press. When the Jews

* This paper was published as a prologue to David Meghnagi’s book *Le sfide di Israele. Lo stato ponte tra Oriente e Occidente* [The Challenges of Israel. The Bridge State between East and West]. Venice: Marsilio, 2010, pp. 9-21. We thank for the permission.

** Full Member of the *International Psychoanalytic Association* (IPA), Chair of the International Master on Holocaust Studies and Professor of Clinical Psychology at the *Roma Tre University* (Rome). Address: Via Luciano Manara 15, scala B, interno 17, 00153 Rome, Italy, e-mail <david.meghnagi@uniroma3.it>.

¹ An echo of Freud’s considerations can be found in Wittgenstein’s 1945 statement “words are actions”, “even words are actions”. See the letter from S. Freud (1935) to Thomas Mann, June 6, 1935, in S. Freud, *Lettere alla fidanzata e ad altri corrispondenti: 1873-1939* [Letters to his Girlfriend and Other Correspondents: 1873-1939], Turin, Boringhieri, 1990; L.W. Wittgenstein, *Pensieri diversi* [Different Thoughts], edited by G.H. Von Wright with the collaboration of H. Nyman, Italian edition edited by M. Ranchetti, Milan, Adelphi, 1980; L.W. Wittgenstein, *Ricerche filosofiche* [Philosophical Investigations] (1953), Turin, Einaudi, 1974, p. 193.

disappeared from the Arab world, it was the turn of the remains of the ancient civilizations that had populated the Near East before the Arab invasions.

The centrality of the Holocaust in the debate on the legitimacy of Israel's existence has meant that the memory of the suffering of the Jews from the Arab world has long been hidden, even from the eyes of the Israelis. Only recently has the enormous symbolic value for a more balanced vision of the conflict begun to be understood.

Remembering the suffering of Jews in the Arab countries is a healthy reminder of the complexity of the problems and of reality. If one accepts that they too are an element of the complex and multi-faceted Middle Eastern mosaic, things appear in a different light.

If the Arab states had accepted the partition vote of the United Nations Assembly, perhaps history would have taken a different turn. On the day on which we celebrate the birth of Israel, the Palestinians could have celebrated too. With their policy towards the Jewish minorities, the Arab States provided – assuming it was necessary – further legitimacy for the existence of Israel. For a heterogenesis of purposes they provided the *raw material* that the Jewish State needed to survive the demographic challenge after the extermination of European Jews².

The refugees were on both sides, with one difference. In the case of the Jews, they were defenceless communities far from the theatre of war, while the Palestinians were an active component of a war desired by the Arab world.

The Jewish settlements that had fallen into the hands of the Arab armies were erased from the face of the earth, the people were killed, forced to flee or taken prisoner. Within Israel, a large part of the Arab population remained or were able to return to their homes³.

When it was founded, the State of Israel had about six hundred thousand inhabitants. Apart from the survivors languishing in European camps waiting for a country to take them in, the only place they could resort to in order to replace Judaism was the Arab East. Designed to resurrect the “new Jew” in the ancient land of the fathers, Zionism could only be saved with the arrival of the survivors of the concentration camps and their oppressed brothers from the East.

Israeli society welcomed its exiles with incomparably high emotional intensity. The arrival of immigrants was seen as a value, besides being necessary in order not to succumb to the demographic challenge.

Despite the difficulties of the early years, life in the shacks and a sense of dissatisfaction and alienation that came to light in the decades that followed, Jews of Afro-Asian origin were considered – and still are – part of a process of national rebirth and redemption after centuries of humiliation. The situation faced by the Palestinians was different. Due to a political decision made by the Arab States, their status as refugees became ontological. Although the Arab world was immense and the displacement was, in some cases, limited to a few kilometres from the ancient villages, the idea of integrating them into neighbouring or distant Arab countries was violently opposed. The religious and nationalist verdict was unavoidable: the creation of a Jewish homeland in the heart of the Arab nation and the Islamic *Umma* was a violation of divine and earthly orders. Whoever tried to reach an agreement was a traitor to be eliminated. So it was for King Abdullah of Jordan in the aftermath of the conflict, for having negotiated secretly with the Zionist leadership. And so it was, three decades later, for the Egyptian president Sadat over an agreement that returned to Egypt all the territories lost in the 1967 war in exchange for a peace that remained cold.

² R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1985), Italian translation edited by F. Sessi, Turin, Einaudi, 1999; D. Meghnagi, *Ricomporre l'infranto. L'esperienza dei sopravvissuti alla Shoah*, Venice, Marsilio, 2005.

³ On this painful page of history, see the dense and touching pages of the autobiography of A. Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2002), published in Italian with the title *Una storia di amore e di tenebra*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2005, pp. 412-455.

Considering the existence of Israel as a sin that could only be cleansed by returning to the *status quo ante* was the great moral and political fault of Arab nationalism, the sign of political immaturity, the origin of a more general failure.

The matter of the refugees could be seen as one of the many painful exchanges between peoples that took place after the Second World War. Just like the German populations in Poland, Yugoslavia and the USSR, the Greek and Turkish populations in the war between Turks and Greeks, the Hindus and Muslims when Pakistan and India gained their independence. And Italy, with the refugees from Istria who for decades were transformed into ghosts deprived of a shared space for pain.

By demonising Israel, the Arab ruling classes avoided facing two facts that were psychologically disturbing to them. In the wars that had periodically marked the history of the region, it was not the colonial and imperial armies that had won. A good half of the soldiers who destroyed the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies in the war of June 1967 was made up of the sons of the *mellahs* and the *haras*, people despised and deemed “unfit” for war who, in the vision that Islam had of them, could at best aspire to be “protected” in exchange for an act of submission⁴.

Not being able to “solve” the Israeli problem with the “methods” adopted by the Turks against the Armenians forty years earlier was the source of an unhappiness that, in its delirium, transformed crimes absent into “Holocausts endured”.

For as long as it was possible to explain the humiliation of 1948 with the corruption and betrayal of the old ruling classes, and that of 1956 with the joint Israeli and Anglo-French aggression, self-deception succeeded in preserving a semblance of reality. The narcissistic wound became more bearable, the Arab honour renewed by the promise that things would be different in future.

When the Arab armies were defeated in a matter of days in the 1967 war, the flight from reality was complete. Israel became the embodiment of evil.

The death knell for the nationalist regimes was delayed by massive support from the Soviet Union in rebuilding the Egyptian and Syrian armies after their defeat in 1967, and in supporting the 1973 conflict in which Egypt regained its “lost honour”.

The crisis of pan-Arab nationalism paved the way for fundamentalism and the re-reading of the Arab-Israeli conflict in terms of a wider clash between the Christian West and Islam, with Israel playing the role of “Crusader State” and of “little Satan” in the service of the “great Satan”. According to the Islamist rationale, the Palestinian jihad “is not just about the Palestinians but about the whole of Islam”⁵. “The Shame of *Nakba*”, an idea that became established in the Arab world after the First World War in response to the European colonial divisions, is the episode of a broader sequence that leads back to the dawn of Islamic civilization.

After the flight of the Jews from the Arab world, the agony of what was left of the Christian civilisation of the East began. Once the local differences had disappeared, the negative images of the “vanquished peoples” dominated by Islam were projected onto Israel. In a growing delirium, Israel

⁴ The status of inferiority of the *dhimmi* has ancient origins. The “Omar Pact” established the rules in 717 until the impact with the European civilisation and colonial penetration brought up the codes according to which Islamic dominion was based on the remains of ancient religious and cultural civilisations that once flourished. For an overview from different angles see Bat Ye’or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam*, published in Italian with the title *Il declino della cristianità sotto l’Islam*, Milan, Lindau, 2009; B. Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, published in Italian with the title *Il suicidio dell’Islam. In che cosa ha sbagliato la civiltà mediorientale*, Milan, Mondadori, 2002; A.A. Wheatcroft, *Infidels: A History of the Conflict Between Christendom and Islam* (2003), published in Italian with the title *Infedeli. 638-2003: il lungo conflitto fra Cristianesimo e Islam*, Bari, Laterza, 2004.

⁵ Statement by Ayatollah Kameney. See *La Repubblica*, April 15, 2006, p. 19. President Ahmadinejad can echo this and say: Israel is “an injustice and by its very nature a permanent threat. It was created to endanger the region and the fact that it continues to exist is a way to perpetuate this threat” (*ibidem*).

became the symbol of the evils that oppress Arab and Islamic civilisation. Later, violence exploded in the heart of the *Umma*, with hundreds of thousands of innocent victims making no headlines.

The Jewish communities of the Arab and Islamic world are just a faint memory today. Yet not so long ago they were a constituent element of reality and made significant contributions in every field.

If you were to take a trip back in time to Alexandria in Egypt, on your return you could tell of a world that is now gone, which made its cultural fabric rich and varied. The same applies to Damascus and Baghdad, Cairo, Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers, Rabat and many other important cities in the Arab world.

Reducing the matter of the Jewish refugees from the Arab countries merely to the Arab-Israeli conflict is a rejection of all critical capacity and thought. Their vicissitudes under the Islamic yoke are little known, their humiliations ignored and their pain invisible.

Welcomed in the land of their fathers, as freed or redeemed, the Jews of the Arab world struggled before they saw their profound identity, culture and history recognised. Animated by the hope of a different life in the land of their fathers, constrained by persecution, they responded en masse to an ancestral call kept alive in the sacred texts and prayers. Apart from the more affluent and those who had links in European metropolises, the majority found it natural to ascend to the land of the fathers, carrying with them seeds of spices and aromas to be planted in order to bring the land back to life.

The Jews of Yemen crossed the desert, bringing with them the *Sefer Torah*, the *Talmud* and the *Zohar*⁶. The planes that brought home people who had been robbed were perceived as the living representation of an ancient prophecy come true.

The only capital that those who had preceded them from Galicia three decades earlier to found the first kibbutz had with them was a copy of *Das Kapital* and a copy of *The Interpretation of Dreams*⁷. For the Jews arriving from Libya after two murderous pogroms, to which a third was added in 1967, the ships were great cradles that restored joy and hope.

Amidst enormous difficulties, the Jews of the Arab world turned exile into exodus. Today they are part of a free nation. An important minority has rebuilt its life in the West by contributing to the development of new adoptive homelands.

For a long time I lived as if the experience of my childhood belonged to the remote past. It was a fracture in time and space. A great watershed divided my life. Before and after were irreducible. Yet only a few years had gone by.

By dealing with the problem also from a professional point of view, working with people who have experienced collective trauma, I understood that my feelings reflected a pattern. Those people might have spent their childhood and youth a thousand miles away from the places they currently live in: Rome, Paris, New York, London and Tel Aviv. But the inner fracture follows the same pattern. Only much later, thanks to the new generations who have not experienced trauma directly, can the bonds be rekindled, renewing interest in the places of the past.

I wasn't alone in my pain. In working through my story, I was able to help those who, under different conditions, had experienced being uprooted and were looking for a way to make the experience of loss and pain bearable. As an analyst I have had the opportunity to work with European and Israeli patients, Arabs and Iranians, Jews, Muslims and Christians.

Concern about the existence of Israel has accompanied me since early childhood. Even if I had forgotten, and I would never have been able to, the legal erasure from the maps of that tiny point called Israel was the symbolic projection of a programme made explicit by the verbal violence of Arab radio broadcasts.

⁶ The *Sefer* (plural: *Sefarim*) *Torah*, are the five books of the *Pentateuch* written following a particular and complex procedure for use in religious service. The *Talmud Bavli* is a collection of the age-old discussions of the rabbis of the academies of Babylon. The *Talmud Yerushalmi* contains the discussions of the academies of Jerusalem and the Land of Israel. The book of the *Zohar* is the most important text of Jewish mysticism.

⁷ See the letter from Chaim Weizman to Ernest Jones, December 7, 1920, in E. Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (1953-57), published in Italian with the title *Vita e opera di Freud*, Milan, Garzanti, 1977, vol. III, p. 46.

Committed to supporting dialogue and to a political settlement of the conflict that tears apart the Near East, the idea of returning to my birthplace, even for a brief visit, had never crossed my mind. There was nothing left to link me to that past. I thought I was lucky because I had come out alive.

The bond between the generations had not broken, children were able to meet their grandparents, people were able to recreate a free life in more hospitable places. But there is still something disturbing about being lucky because others have met an unspeakable fate. Emotions can unravel when we encounter the scents of our childhood, while we wait for a connecting flight, on the train, sitting at a bar or watching our children playing.

Many years ago, as I was waiting at the airport in Rome, on the board indicating the departing flights, two distinct indications (Rome-Tel Aviv, Rome-Tripoli) looked to me as if they were overlapping, due to the fatigue caused by the wait. For a moment I had the feeling that one place led to another and vice versa. As though in a dream, I could leave and return, be at home everywhere, because the whole world is a home and the whole of mankind is a single family.

My city had always travelled with me. It was part of my dream world along with the rich and expressive rhythms of oriental music, the love songs and liturgical verses that made our synagogues joyful; the nostalgia I feel remembering my lost friends, the intensity of the scents of my native country and its sea breeze; the fantasies I conjured up in my head as I watched the departing ships, imagining myself on board; the pleasure I felt in passing from Arabic to Hebrew and from Hebrew to Arabic, in composing an essay in Italian as if it were Latin, until a teacher asked me: “Why don’t you imitate the prose of the French illuminists? They wrote clearly because their ideas were clear. It would enrich and improve your Italian”. The change was immediate and the results were not long in coming. For a long time, I continued to be inspired by 18th century French writers when writing in Italian, until I found a way to distil the mixture of languages and worlds in which I grew up and dissolve them inside myself.

The path of reconstruction of a life is never linear, especially when it involves complete human groups. In order to heal, wounds need to be nourished by hope. Otherwise, older fears merge with more recent ones and the past can obscure the present. Without a vision that keeps future hope alive, even the present becomes foggy and can become unbearable.

This is why I promised myself not to do or say anything that I might one day be ashamed of in front of my children and that, at least internally, I would do everything I could to keep the barriers that separate our worlds open. Despite the painful events by which they are divided, Jews and Muslims, Arabs and Israelis are not condemned to be hostile forever. There is and must be a way out and if this possibility is not immediate, it doesn’t mean that we have to deny it to the future.

What separates creative realism from Machiavellian cynicism lies in the loss of the ability to dream. By imagining different scenarios, the weight of the past and the difficulties of the present become more bearable. We can tolerate the sacrifices that the difficult situation imposes.

In the Jewish tradition, the element of choice is essential. Even if relations in the external reality seem to be broken forever, on an internal level everything must be done to preserve freedom. In the Kabbalah, the world of Pleroma is also based on divisions that man has to reconcile. The prayers and invocations that ascend from the world serve to reconnect what has been broken in the celestial world. In the meditation of the *Shema*⁸, the most sublime of Jewish invocations, evoking the unity of the divine helps to actualise it. The word *echad* (one) corresponds in Hebrew to the number thirteen, half of the number that corresponds to the unpronounceable Tetragrammaton. Focusing with his intellect and heart on the unity of God, man contributes to the process of reunification of the higher and lower worlds⁸.

⁸ The *Shema* is the fundamental prayer of Israel in which God’s unicity is affirmed. It is recited in the morning service (shacharith) and in the evening service (‘arvith).

For centuries, Christian civilisation has been engaged in the physical persecution of Jews, but today this is no longer the case, and many of the walls that once separated Jews from those who oppressed them have fallen. It took the Catholic Church half a century after Auschwitz to fully accept the existence of Israel.

When, at the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Paul VI visited the places where Jesus preached, he always referred to the Holy Land, never the State of Israel. The word was taboo. Before making his historic visit to the Western Wall, Pope John Paul II waited until the end of the millennium, making sure that he visited every other country in the region first. Despite the contrasts and disappointments, relations between Israel and the Vatican, talks and visits by the popes to synagogues are a reality.

The Germans and the French fought each other for ages, but this didn't stop them from being the driving force behind the European unification process.

Despite the Nazi crimes, the Israelis did not close their hearts to Germans who were born later. They did not condemn the children for the sins of their fathers, welcoming them as visitors to their painful country. When the time came, many Israeli citizens of German origin, while retaining their nationality, obtained German citizenship too.

Despite the pogroms of 1946 against the survivors who returned to their homes, despite the anti-Semitism of Gomulka in 1968, many Israeli citizens who turned to the Polish diplomatic offices to obtain citizenship.

Why shouldn't Arabs and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians return to talking to each other someday? Why shouldn't Arabs acknowledge that the expansion of the Islamic civilization has been a form of colonisation that has led to the progressive extinction of older civilisations someday? Why shouldn't the European left make the pain of the *dhimmi* people its own someday? Why shouldn't the Turkish people acknowledge the terrible pain inflicted on the Armenian nation someday? Why shouldn't a Palestinian be able to identify with the history of Jews of Afro-Asian origin? Why shouldn't the grandson of a survivor open up his heart to the tragedy of the grandchildren of the 1948 war refugees?

Finding an answer to these distressing questions in my childhood was not easy. There were no symbolic spaces in which to formulate them. In my country of birth, even a basketball match could degenerate into a generalised physical assault on all the Jews at the stadium, if it was a critical game and the "Jews" won. Anxiety and fear were a constituent element of our daily lives.

The illusions that arise from despair but can keep the hope of a different life alive, can include that of exaggerating the possibility of influencing reality. Subjectivism can alter the ability to distinguish what is possible from what goes beyond. Under the blows of the profound transformations that Israeli society experienced in the 1980s and 1990s, and in the impact with the first Intifada, a significant part of the country had reached out and been able to feel empathy for the suffering of its counterpart. Then things turned out differently to expectations, as was predictable by those who could see the ambiguous reality of an agreement that postponed the discussion of the most important issues until the final phase of the peace process.

It is not a question of abdicating the sense of reality, but of keeping the feeling of hope alive – together with the awareness of the opportunities and dangers that the future may hold – without which a project of life and society could not exist.

If the boundaries of the spirit remain open – and at certain times it may be necessary to preserve psychological integrity against the madness of the world – the persecutor does not install himself in the soul, poisoning it.