

JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Volume 7:1 Fall 2008 סתיו תשס"ט

ISRAEL: THE DREAM MEETS REALITY



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Perspective on Jewish Education

David Breakstone



Narrative or **Truth** – A Response to Francis Nataf

Susan Handelman

Susan Handelman challenges the very postmodern notion of “narratives” as a blurring of truths.

*“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”*

William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”

I am grateful to my colleague Francis Nataf for suggesting that I write a response to his essay. I admire his openness to the opinions of those who differ with him. He is educator and scholar of great sensitivity and intellectual honesty, and has posed an important challenge to us all.

Let me first say where I do agree with him: Jews have not been doing a good job teaching the Arab-Israeli conflict. Our approach is ineffective and outmoded – be it for Jewish day schools, students in Universities, or the general public in Israel and the Diaspora. The consequences are dire. In fact, the consequences of failing, now that Israel’s existence has been threatened in unprecedented ways in the public sphere in the West, and by the President of Iran, may be life-and-death.

Self-criticism is a Jewish and Western democratic value. It is indeed important to play close attention to what Nataf calls the

“Palestinian narrative,” the Arab account of their encounter with Zionism. But as Nataf also recognizes, it’s an exceedingly difficult and risky task, enmeshed in larger clashes of cultures and values.

I’d like to begin my response by first discussing one of those larger frameworks: “postmodern” views of history, truth and ethics underlying key parts of Nataf’s analysis. I want to then examine some problems in postmodernism, and especially its current application to the Arab-Israeli conflict and education, and finally suggest some alternatives.

The Palestinian “Narrative” and Postmodernism

For those unfamiliar with postmodernism, let me try to explain it “on one foot.” Postmodernism is a philosophical reaction to Enlightenment notions of rationality, objectivity, and ability to gain

sure knowledge about the world. A basic postmodern move is to claim that there are no objective facts, only constructed interpretations. All we have to work with in dealing with the world, then, are a variety of “narratives.” So where the word “narrative” was once used mostly for literature and fiction, it is now applied to the discourses of science, history, medicine, law, politics.

Every narrative, the argument further goes, is at bottom an expression of a particular set of values or “ideology.” Narratives acquire political strength through the “power of a dominant class” to enforce a version. There is no “Grand Narrative,” to use Jean-Francois Lyotard’s term, or “transcendent value” that stands above all the various narratives, and through which one can interpret and evaluate them. There are no universal values.



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Postmodern thinkers, then, often engage in “destabilizing Grand Narratives” that had been taken for transcendent or all-encompassing truths. This endeavor also requires one to simultaneously acknowledge how one’s own stance is partial, and one’s own position is only another “narrative” among others. One must allow other narratives “to interrupt”

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one’s own, “listen to the other,” sometimes even to the extent of “privileging the other.” Otherwise, one is deemed to be repressive and violent.

There is an attractive moral stance here, especially for Jews whose traditions of self-criticism and sensitivity to the suffering of others are so well-developed. As a university professor for the last thirty years, I myself was an early advocate of using postmodernism to understand rabbinic thought. It yielded new understandings of how rabbinic modes of interpretation open up the biblical and talmudic narratives, and grant humans interpretive creativity. Rabbinic thought also “destabilizes” claims to any absolute final knowledge of God, or the text.

A strong dose of philosophical humility is always helpful, even essential. But like all doses, it needs to be in the right proportion to be healthy and effective rather than lethal. As the 20th century ended and became the 21st, the intensifying global clash of cultures took a new and radically violent turn, in which the Arab-Israeli conflict became enveloped. The application of these postmodern concepts has often led to a harsh critique of the Israeli “Grand Narrative” and almost uncritical acceptance of the Palestinian one. This has been disastrous for both Israelis and Palestinians. It has led to delegitimization of Israel among intellectual Western elites and spilled over into the mass media and popular opinion. Moreover, criteria for judging the credibility, the honesty or dishonesty of

narratives, has been lost in the imperative to empathize with the other’s narrative, and the critique of “objective truth.”

Day schools

Young people in day schools (and Universities) are at an especially sensitive age where their critical faculties, ethical

and religious sensitivities are just being formed. The influential work of William Perry and his followers has delineated various stages learners go through in confronting new knowledge and ideas. The educator’s task is to prod them to move from their initial position of absolutist thought (*Dualist* – either/or, black and white thinking) to the next level of intellectual complexity, called *Multiplicity* (i.e., there is no One Absolute Right answer but several possible explanations). After *Multiplicity*, students arrive at what Perry calls *Relativism*, a stage where the learner lets go of all firm grounds for truth. This stage is dangerous because the student can easily lapse into the view that “everyone has the right to his or her opinion” and deny the possibility of making any judgments at all. Or become cynical and assume “it’s all just a game.” The educator’s task is to move the student further on to the next stage, which Perry calls *Contextual Relativism*. This means to help the student know how make judgments and personal commitments despite the lack of absolute certain grounds.

It’s a difficult process for the learner to negotiate, and requires both challenge and support. It’s also interesting that Perry’s description of the stages of student cognitive development parallels the larger postmodern cultural problems I described above. The same danger lies in moving from the claim there are no “objective historical facts” but rather a multiplicity of interpretations – to then saying, “all narratives are equal, and can’t be judged.”

So our task, especially in the education of day school and university students is to help them develop standards by which to evaluate “narratives” and the *intentionality* behind them. In our postmodern times, students need also to learn to analyze, evaluate, and employ the rhetoric of images and acquire a “visual literacy,” since so much of the Arab-Israeli conflict is presented to them via the media and internet.

As Gerald Graff and others have pointed out, the contemporary educational curriculum has lost what was once one of its key components: the study of rhetoric, and rules of argument. Students have been left clueless about how to effectively evaluate and engage in public discourse. And they need to be able to decipher when a narrative is fair and self-critical, or when it is intended to deceive or demonize, or when it emanates from an entirely different set of values, which can be dangerously inimical. As Robert Scholes has argued, one can grant that there may be no objective “truth,” with a “capital T,” but one can still evaluate interpretations for accuracy, fairness, comprehensiveness. That is, one can demand “truthful-ness”; for, as he writes, “the love of truth seems to me the first protocol of teaching”.

Let’s be more specific and take an example from Nataf’s essay. He writes that a costly but successful Israeli military raid against Fatah and Jordan in March 1968 at Karameh is seen by Palestinians as “their equivalent of the Warsaw ghetto uprising” and a seminal event. If we would teach that, how will the lesson go? Will the teacher present this information in order for students to understand that the Palestinians have their own equivalent “narrative” and one can interpret facts in many ways, and one must also empathize with their view? The “Warsaw Ghetto” analogy (it is unclear if was used by the Palestinians or by Nataf) implies an uprising against vicious oppressor bent on genocide. Sympathy inevitably shifts to the underdog. So were the Israeli soldiers acting like “Nazis” as they are so often portrayed in the Arab and European Press, and even sometimes by the Israel left?

Would there be a role play, perhaps, with students representing both sides of the

story and engaging in a debate to be decided by other students? According to what criteria? Would the teacher help the students evaluate the analogy to the Warsaw ghetto and make distinctions? Would the lesson examine how *ways of labeling and framing and interpreting* can also indeed be lethal? Would there be an accompanying discussion of rabbinic codes on the conduct of war, when it is necessary and justified and when not? If one narrative calls an act of killing a “suicide bombing,” and the other calls it a “martyrdom operation” and “natural response to the occupation,” we need to be able to judge whether it was murder or not – otherwise we are engaged in the “suicide” of thought.

A frustrated student of mine asked a few years ago when we were studying postmodernism in a graduate literary theory course in Israel: “How come there are no postmodern suicide bombers?” In other words, why does the postmodern move of intense self-criticism, epistemological skepticism, destabilizing one’s own identity, and listening to the “other” seem to be mainly on the Jewish side and not on the Arab side.

So will the teacher presenting the Palestinian narrative also have students investigate whether the Palestinian version itself has been constructed with self-criticism, intellectual honesty, and post-modern humility? Is the Palestinian narrative being taught to Palestinian students with the same toleration for the narratives of others that Nataf is requiring of the Jewish students? We must demand such reciprocity for the suggestion to be plausible. And while Nataf recognizes the dangers in his proposal – that students might lose their identification with their own Israeli/Jewish identity – he does not offer an answer to this problem.

The marketplace of ideas

This returns us to Nataf’s “marketplace of ideas.” Are the various Palestinian narratives adhering to the same rules of argument, evidence, and transparency required in that market place? That famous phrase relies on an analogy between the economic benefits of competitive capitalist

free markets, and the way the best ideas are supposed to emerge through free expression in a liberal democracy.

The analogy does not hold up well for current debates about the Israeli-Arab conflict. The “marketplace” in this conflict is neither free nor rational: bombs are crashing into it, both literally and metaphorically; it is under siege. Contemporary versions of the conflict have little to do with the kind of medieval intellectual and theological arguments Maimonides was speaking of his in his *da mah lehashiv*. As Richard Landes

has noted, free Western democratic societies have been able to give birth to postmodern skepticism; unfree Arab regimes stifle dissent, and often encourage “Grand Narratives of victimization.” That’s a classically pre-modern way for authoritarian regimes to deflect responsibility: finding a scapegoat. Historically, he continues, those kind of narratives reinforce the victimization of their peoples, and do not free them. And the catastrophic history of the Palestinians and their inability to build any kind civil society over the last sixty years reflects that.



Landes has also investigated the phenomenon he calls “Pallywood,” the conscious altering and doctoring by Palestinians of images and narratives intended for Western consumption. We all remember the famous accusations and television images of the purported Israeli “massacre at Jenin” in Spring 2002 which caused a storm in the world-wide press and damaged Israel. But the Israeli military had deliberately chosen not to bomb the city from the air, instead conducting a house-to-house operation of only five blocks in the Jenin refugee camp, so as to minimize civilian casualties. This came at a great cost to Israel – 23 soldiers lost. Rather than the hundreds of dead claimed by Palestinians, 56 Palestinians were killed, most of them

Da mah lehashiv – Beyond Narrative

If it is “war by other means,” then should the Jewish response be the traditional *da mah lehashiv*, to use Nataf’s term? Of course, the Rabbis were not always calm multi-culturalists whose response was to politely debate the opponent. They were also quite realistic and adamant about how to deal with one’s existential opponents, be they external or internal. Historical circumstances also forced upon them varied responses.

So what does one do when an enemy is using highly sophisticated “narrative” techniques? For narratives are not neutral, as the postmodern position tells us. When does an intellectual or theological challenge

Finally, I think that when we teach and analyze the conflict, we need to move beyond the notion that all we have is “narratives.” We have to take back and reconfigure the terms by which the conflict has been defined. We need to retrieve the original Hebrew meanings of the words which designate the reality of Israel: place, peoplehood, holiness. We need sophisticated analyses of the meaning in Jewish thought of Hebrew words like *makom*, *am*, *kedushah*, *shalom*. How are those tied together in the meaning of the land of Israel. As the philosopher Wittgenstein famously said, the limits of my language are the limits of my world. Zionism is not reducible to nationalist or historical “narratives,” nor does it begin in 1948, or with Herzl.

Rather than the hundreds of dead claimed by Palestinians, 56 Palestinians were killed, most of them armed. But once the “Palestinian narrative” took hold in the media and the minds of television viewers around the world, all the later Israeli official clarifications of “facts,” did little to erase the damage or remove the term “Jenin massacre” from the minds of Arabs.

armed. But once the “Palestinian narrative” took hold in the media and the minds of television viewers around the world, all the later Israeli official clarifications of “facts,” did little to erase the damage or remove the term “Jenin massacre” from the minds of Arabs. In this and other similar cases, some writers even argued – in a caricature of postmodernism – that it does not matter whether it “actually happened” or not, since Israel is responsible for many “massacres of Palestinians” and so it is a “reality.”

Of course, there are many, many “Palestinian narratives,” not just one. Certainly, Jewish students need to learn more in depth about Arab culture, and religion. They need to more deeply understand the complex 1500 year history of Islam, its historical manifestations, its religious tenets, its political history. But when the Palestinian narrative includes Arafat’s proclamation that a Jewish Temple never existed, Jesus was a Palestinian and not a Jew, and there was never any historical continuity of Jewish presence in the Land of Israel, this is a conscious and intended assault on truth, a calculated “war by other means.”

become a political and violent external threat? In what ways can obscure or benign postmodern ideas become allied to visceral hatred of Israel and Jews? How do we account for the unholy alliance of many post-modern intellectuals with pre-modern absolutist Arab regimes?

Chaim Perelman (1912-1984) the great rhetorical theorist in his masterwork *The New Rhetoric*, brilliantly noted that the skeptic and fanatic are two sides of the same coin. Both believe that the criteria for truth can only be Absolute – the skeptic denies one can ever reach it; the fanatic says he or she alone has it. Perelman was a Belgian Jew, philosopher and jurist who himself survived the Nazis, and as a result dedicated his later academic work to understanding the nature of rhetoric, the relations between argument and ethics, facts and values. His insight helps us understand a strange alliance between postmodern skepticism and Islamic jihad. The ideas of rational consensus, the “market place of ideas,” respect for rules of argument, evidence, and liberal democracy are not to be found in either the jihadist or radical postmodern positions.

So we would need also to dig deeper with our students to understand how the Palestinian narrative has been “constructed,” and ask why the martyrdom and jihad narratives have seduced so many in the Arab world, and also in Western elites. The reasons, of course, are complex and there is not space to elaborate. Let me just address one aspect, however, connected to education and psychology.

The famous Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who himself had escaped to America from Nazi Germany in the 1940’s, wrote an essay called “A Theology of Education” in 1961, about the problems of contemporary education in his book *Theology of Culture*. Writes Tillich:

One could observe how European youth before World War II were longing for symbols in which they could see a convincing expression of the meaning of existence. They desired to be initiated into these symbols which demanded unconditional surrender, even if they showed very soon their demonic-destructive character. The young ones wanted something *absolutely serious*

[italics his] – in contrast to the playing with cultural goods. They wanted something for which they could sacrifice themselves, even if it was distorted religious-political aim. (152)

It is not difficult to see the parallels between Tillich's description of pre-World War II European malaise, and contemporary

A Hamas leader famously said that his people would in the end win, "Because the Jews love life, but we love death more."

Islamic religious-political movements which also preach a surrender to absolutes, and commit horrific violence in their name. Contemporary postmodern Western culture, with its extreme skepticism and loss of faith in traditional religious belief, is unable to grasp the motivation of these kinds of pre-modern mentalities. And what is the Jewish answer to a similar search among Jewish youth today, who seek expression of the meaning of existence?

On a broader level, the mission of the Jew in history is prophetic one; the role of Israel is part of a long process of universal redemption and repair of the world. As the great contemporary French educator, R. Leon Askenazi ("Manitou") has stressed,

in Hebrew, the word for "history" is *toldot*, from the root meaning "to give birth, to engender." *Toldot* are much more than "narratives" – history is the engendering of generations, to bring forth something, to enact God's designs, and to choose life. Our own claim to the land of Israel is tied into a holy mission given to us by God.

A Hamas leader famously said that his people would in the end win, "Because the Jews love life, but we love death more." But we Jews have a famous verse in the biblical Song of Songs (8:6), that "Love is as strong as death." I am sure Nataf joins me in yearning to educate our students with love for the Land of Israel, the People of Israel, the Torah of Israel, and the God of Israel so that we may vanquish those who "love death more," and bring redemption to the rest of the world, which now is caught up in the same battle.

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