

Death and Sacrifice in Israel

EYAL PRESS

ONE EVENING THE summer before last, in the fourth week of the war between Israel and Hezbollah, I had dinner at an Italian restaurant in Jerusalem with my cousin, Ronit, and her husband, Aryeh, a commander in the Israeli army. Aryeh had just returned from Lebanon, his second stint there. The previous day, he had attended the funeral of one of his childhood friends, who was killed in the fighting. Somehow, the conversation got around to a topic about which Jews seem to be perennially obsessed, particularly in stressful times—where, in a world full of danger, it is best to live.

“You know,” said Ronit, “if I could leave this place and live somewhere else, I would do it.”

The statement struck me as perfectly understandable. Ronit was pregnant, had a two-year-old son at home, and had spent many sleepless nights over the past few weeks worrying about her husband’s safety. Like many Israelis, she looked into the future and saw more wars, more conflict, more suicide bombings, along with the moment when she would have to send her children into the army. If offered the choice to avoid all of this, who in her situation would not be tempted?

But Aryeh was having none of it: the only place where Jews could feel a true sense of belonging, he insisted, is Israel. Only in their own country could they control their own destiny, and thus feel genuinely secure. I mentioned to him that the Jews I knew who resided in the United States, where I lived, did not feel that they were excluded, much less under threat. “But do you think you’re *really* accepted?” he pressed me. I told him that I did. He smiled in a manner suggesting he was not persuaded. I tried another tack, pointing out that the chance I might be the victim of an anti-Semitic attack in New York, or, say, Portland or Seattle, was extremely remote, whereas the possibility an Israeli citizen might be killed or

mained by someone harboring ill will toward Jews in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem was very real. Shouldn't this be taken into account?

"Okay," he finally conceded, "so you can live well in New York. But you live for yourself."

It was the last phrase that explained the gap between us. The gist of our argument was not about where it is safest to live. It was about what one ought to live *for*. To Aryeh, the answer was obvious: for one's people, one's country. This is what imbued his life with larger meaning. It is what redeemed, indeed made honorable, the death of his friend. It is why he was willing to go back to Lebanon again, even though when I asked him what prolonging the war would ultimately change, a cynical expression spread across his face: "Nothing," he said, "it won't change anything."

I could see why, to someone convinced he was defending a beleaguered country, living in a place like New York might seem comparatively bereft of purpose. But I was also struck by the assumption implicit in his perspective: that living for something larger than oneself requires special devotion to the members of one's faith (as opposed to, say, humanity at large or a set of abstract principles); that it is worth not only weathering certain inconveniences for this but, if need be, sacrificing one's life.



It is common these days to speak of a culture of martyrdom that has taken root in large parts of the Middle East, a scourge that has arisen in tandem with the spread of radical Islam. The trend is, in fact, unmistakable. But the State of Israel has a culture of martyrdom of its own. The day after my dinner with my cousin, I caught a glimpse of it while sitting at a pizzeria in Tel Aviv, when a news report came on announcing the identity of the latest Israeli soldiers who had lost their lives in Lebanon. One by one, the name, the age, the hometown, and in some cases the picture of various officers and reservists flashed on the television. Immediately, the people around me fell silent; pedestrians who had been strolling by paused to gaze at the screen. Behind me, two middle-aged women stood with their arms

folded across their chests, their expressions sullen. Only when the segment was over, when the last soldier's name had been announced and the news switched back over to other matters, did the air of solemnity lift and conversation resume.

On one level, the point of the news segment was simple: to honor the members of a society who had made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. But honoring soldiers who have perished on the battlefield is never merely about the dead. It is also about the living: about the place of sacrifice in a culture (and the particular form that it should take); about whose deaths are sanctified and mourned; about the uses to which the memory of the fallen are put.

During the Second Lebanon War, there was much talk in Israel about how the spirit of volunteerism among young people had waned: that, in effect, too many Israelis these days live only for themselves. The problem was not that the nation's youth were devoting insufficient time to, say, helping the poor (whose ranks in Israel have been growing) or participating in other socially beneficial activities. It was that too few were growing up dreaming of distinguishing themselves in the military, of giving back to their country by rushing into the ranks of the Israel Defense Force. In the press as on the streets, complaints were voiced repeatedly that Israel had indeed failed to win a resounding victory in Lebanon not because the war was poorly planned and managed but because its citizens had grown soft, allowed their fighting spirit to wither, slackened into a nation "for which not many are willing to kill and be killed," as the columnist Ari Shavit put it in a widely quoted article in *Ha'aretz*. Some even suggested it would have been a good thing had the kids growing up in the so-called "Tel Aviv bubble" seen their neighborhoods come under rocket fire: then, the implication went, they would stop imagining they live in a normal country and learn that it is their duty to fight.

I put this theory to an aunt of mine one day. "It's true," she said, "if young people here are not willing to fight and die for this country, I'm afraid we will not survive." She was voicing a sentiment that Israel's founders began cultivating long before the state existed on

the map. The first memorial book commemorating Jews in Palestine who died in clashes with Arabs appeared in 1911. Nine years later, on 1 March 1920, a one-armed Russian soldier named Joseph Trumpeldor was shot and killed while defending an isolated Jewish settlement that had fallen under Arab attack at a place called Tel Hai, in the upper Galilee. "No matter, it is good to die for our country," Trumpeldor reportedly uttered on his deathbed, a phrase that would transform him into a national icon. He and seven other Jews who died in the battle were buried in a cemetery, on top of which now stands the statue of a roaring lion. The cemetery became a shrine to Israeli schoolchildren, who still make pilgrimages to the site.

Israel is not, of course, the only country where martyred combatants have been honored in this way. In *Imagined Communities*, the historian Benedict Anderson observes, "No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers." Anderson notes that nationalism arose in the eighteenth century partly to furnish individuals with a sense of continuity and transcendence at the very moment when religion began to lose its monopoly on this function, which explains why "death and immortality" have long been central to what he terms "the nationalist imagining." Any American who has visited a military cemetery or memorial understands what Anderson means. But in Israel, the feelings aroused by images of fallen soldiers are particularly visceral and intense, perhaps because the nation is so small, perhaps because it lacks a volunteer army, perhaps because it has never known peace.

Or maybe it is something else: the need that the Zionist movement's founders felt to transform Jewish consciousness of death from a tragic to a redemptive mode, and to restore honor and dignity to a people who might otherwise have felt burdened by a sense of shame and powerlessness. The latter feelings derived, of course, from the fact that virtually every Israeli family could point to relatives who had died senseless, unheroic deaths within recent memory. In the case of my family, my mother's older sister, Anika, who died of typhoid after the Nazis ordered the Jews of Romania to be deported to work

camps, fell into this category. My mother herself was born in a camp called Yampol. Her parents survived several brutal years there. There was a black-and-white photograph of Anika, their lost daughter, on a mantle in the house in which I grew up, showing a pretty girl in a ponytail sitting next to a white dog. But something about the picture made her seem remote to me, or maybe this is simply what I wanted: to distance myself from the haunting image of a secretly unwelcome ghost and replace it with something more redeeming. This I found in the story of my paternal grandfather, Benjamin, a Russian Jew from Bialystok who emigrated to Palestine in 1927 and who enlisted in the Jewish brigade during World War II, and in my father, a *sabra* who was born in Jerusalem and served in the Israeli army. Naturally, I sought to follow their example, fantasizing as a kid about what it would be like to be an Israeli Defense Force paratrooper myself, to put my life on the line as I imagined they had.



Without ever going there, and despite the fact that I grew up in America rather than Israel, I managed to internalize part of the spirit of Tel Hai all the same. It is good to die for the country. It is honorable. It is redeeming somehow.

But is it, always?

One evening in Haifa, I struck up a conversation with a woman named Eva Morgenstern. We met on the second-floor lounge of the Dan Panorama hotel. It was the day before the cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah was set to go into effect, and all day sirens had been wailing to warn of incoming rockets. One of them had slammed into a residential neighborhood roughly three hundred meters down the hill from the hotel, sending flames and a cloud of black smoke shooting upward that a photographer in one of the rooms caught on camera. The rocket hit several cars and incinerated them, spraying ball bearings and shards of glass throughout the adjoining streets but somehow failing to kill anyone.

Eva lives in Sydney, Australia. She had moved there with her family from Israel partly in order to raise her children in a less

war-torn place, she told me. She was in Haifa because, two years earlier, one of her sons, Assaf, had decided to come back to Israel and volunteer in the army. On 26 July, he was among eight Israeli soldiers who were killed in a Hezbollah ambush in Bint Jbeil, in southern Lebanon. His death, I would subsequently learn, had received extensive press coverage, which is not surprising: in returning to Israel, he had performed the ultimate act of Jewish patriotism, trading in the easy life in Australia for army boots and a gun.

As I listened to Eva describe what happened, I thought back to my conversation with Aryeh: here, by the standards he had laid out, was a story of Jewish heroism and sacrifice, of an individual willing to risk his life for a larger cause. Yet I couldn't help but wonder whether it might more accurately be viewed as a tale of unnecessary loss and preventable death. Eva's son had died two weeks into the war. Ze'ev Schiff, Israel's leading military analyst, would subsequently report that eight days before this, on 18 July, Dan Halutz, Israel's chief of staff, and Amos Yadlin, head of intelligence, informed Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that Israel had achieved its war aims and that "it was possible, at that stage, to accept a cease-fire called for by the government of Lebanon and Hezbollah." The matter was not brought up for a vote for several more weeks. I didn't know the details of this meeting at the time. But every day the papers dropped hints that nobody was quite sure what the government's rationale for prolonging the fighting was—why more names were being added to the list of casualties, more Lebanese villages bombed, more reservists called up.

The next day, I saw Eva again, on the deck by the hotel pool. She had recovered her son's cell phone by this point. She clutched it tightly in the palm of her hand, as though doing so might somehow bring him back. "There's a whole history in here," she said, "all his friends, soldiers in the army, the names of people he called." I nodded, trying to think of something consoling to say.

"Tell me," she then asked me suddenly, "in recent years, did you ever think of coming here and serving in the army?"

I paused, uncertain what to say. Then I told her the truth.

"No," I replied, and felt a wave of discomfort sweep over me, as

if I were being called out as the wrong kind of Jew, the kind who—unlike my father and grandfather, unlike Eva’s son—lived not for his country, but for himself.

“Good,” she said. “You’re smart.”



Afterward, I wondered whether Eva had been reading the papers—and hoped that, for her sake, she hadn’t been. I also wondered if, given how rapidly the dead in Israel are turned into symbols, especially in the heat of war, she had had a moment to grieve privately for her son’s passing: to remember not the soldier-turned-war-hero but simply the son she had known and loved. I wondered this partly because of a story I’d read about a soldier named Erez in the book *Rubber Bullets*, by Yaron Ezrahi. In 1967, when he was seven years old, Erez learned that his father, Amnon, had been killed in the 1967 Six-Day War. Immediately, the Israeli government began sending the family books on Jewish heroism and medals of honor. The kibbutz where Erez lived erected a monument to his father and another man who had died in the war. A certain message about how men become heroes was being sent, and it evidently sank in: at age eighteen, Erez decided to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a paratrooper. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, he traveled with his unit to the border. Then he did something unusual: he informed his commander that he didn’t want to serve, that he was afraid to die.

Viewed one way, it is a story of duty forsaken, of a young soldier experiencing a sudden failure of nerve. Yet Erez’s decision to disobey was in its own way brave. And there was a principle behind it: an affirmation of the individual against the collective demands of a culture that relentlessly celebrates obedience and sacrifice. Soon thereafter, Erez set about trying to mourn his father privately, to reclaim the parent who, despite all the tributes and memorials, or maybe because of them, he had never really known. He discovered Amnon had been an amateur photographer, and began taking pictures himself. In 1990, an exhibition of his work appeared that included

installations—wooden coffins, a room full of chairs inscribed with the words “Reserved for the Heroes’ Families”—that hinted at how, in Israel, personal tragedy is transformed into public theater. Not surprisingly, the message didn’t sit well with everyone. The Fund for Bereaved Families of the Paratrooper Forces withdrew an offer it had made to distribute a book on the exhibition to its members. Some labeled Erez a “traitor.”

He was nothing of the sort, I remember thinking when reading Ezrahi’s book. But the truth is, there have been times when I might well have labeled him this way myself. When I was growing up, I traveled to Israel every summer to visit relatives. I looked forward to the trips all year, both because I felt at home there, a sense of belonging rooted in the familiarity of everything from the language to the food, and because it meant getting to spend time with my cousin, Lior, and his friends in *Ha’shomer Hatzair*, a socialist youth group. The bonds among the kids in the group were quasi-familial, and I was welcomed into the brotherhood, tagging along with my cousin and his friends on trips to the Galilee and to various *kibbutzim*, many of which were struggling to survive but that, to me, still possessed an aura of nobility, emblems of the egalitarian ideals that had inspired people like my grandfather, who was both a Zionist and a socialist. We didn’t talk much about war or serving in the military at the time. Our obsessions were sports and girls, and anyway my cousin and his friends were left-leaning peaceniks. But it was understood that when I would be entering college, they would be going into the army. As among many American Jews, there was something romantic about this to me—to serve in the armed forces of the scrappy country created in the aftermath of the Holocaust, a place where *Jews* flew F-16s and commanded tank battalions. What could be cooler and more glamorous? If anyone back then dared to say something negative about Israel in my presence, I took it personally, and made sure to set them straight. One time on the bus home from school, I overheard a classmate of mine describe Israel as a trigger-happy country that was constantly picking fights with its neighbors. I was outraged, and responded by reeling off the various times—1948, 1956, 1967,

1973—when, to the contrary, Arabs had tried to annihilate the Jewish state. Anyone who denied this was an anti-Semite, I proclaimed.

A year or so into college, the righteousness that infused my tone on such occasions began to fade. It was the time of the first Palestinian Intifada. In the papers and on TV, I started seeing images of Israeli soldiers exactly my age chasing after children, manning checkpoints, harassing elderly Palestinians. The more I read about what was happening, the less convincing my initial rationalizing instinct—that these people were terrorists—seemed. For the first time, I thought about being in the shoes of those soldiers, and felt relief not to be. I also started reading books, such as Tom Segev's *1949: The First Israelis* and Benny Morris's study of the birth of the Palestinian refugee crisis, that clashed with the airbrushed version of Israeli history I'd been taught in Hebrew school: the uncomplicated tale of a long-suffering people—*my* people—winning their freedom. The evidence presented by these authors revealed that the story of triumph and redemption I'd grown up associating with Zionism was, for others, a story of dispossession and tragedy. Encountering this evidence was painful and discomfiting at first. Only later did it occur to me that perhaps this was not the worst lesson to learn: that history is almost never uncomplicated, that suffering is not always ennobling, and that, for Jews no less than any other group, nationalism can be a blinding force.



The reservists featured in the news report I watched at the pizzeria were not the only ones I heard about during my visit to Israel in August of 2006. Every day, similar stories appeared in the newspapers and on television. I read about the soldiers' families, their wives and girlfriends, their careers, their hobbies, their hopes and dreams. It was moving to read these stories, and, as when I'd spoken to Eva, a part of me felt ashamed about my comparative good fortune, about how easily I might have been (but wasn't) in their place—because my parents had left Israel, because I had decided against coming back.

But another part of me felt unease, not because those soldiers and their grieving relatives weren't deserving of sympathy but because the sense of identification I was being encouraged to forge with them was, by nature, selective. It did not extend to every victim of the war. I wasn't exposed to similar stories about, for example, the hundreds of Lebanese civilians killed in the course of the fighting in places like Qana and Beirut. I didn't hear the voices of their bereaved relatives. Truth be told, I barely heard mention of them at all.

This is, to some degree, understandable: every nation in the world honors its dead more than it does those in the countries against whom it is fighting. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington lists the names of the 58,202 American soldiers who died in the Vietnam War; there is no place on the Wall for the three million Vietnamese who were killed. To expect people to refrain from making such distinctions, particularly in the context of war, is unrealistic, maybe even unfair. But in Israel, those distinctions nevertheless seem sharper, more unbridgeable, as though for a Jew even to tiptoe along the imaginative boundary, to ponder whether the death of a Lebanese civilian is any less tragic than that of an Israeli soldier, is to commit an act of disloyalty, of bad faith, of deviation from the assumption that the losses to be mourned most deeply are "ours"—that is, Jews.

The one place in Israel I didn't feel this was in Nazareth, a city of seventy thousand that sits on a plateau between some mountains, roughly twenty miles south of the Israeli border with Lebanon. As most Christians know, Nazareth is home to the Church of the Annunciation, where the angel Gabriel is believed to have informed Mary of the impending birth of Jesus. It is also the largest Arab city in Israel. Five times a day, you can hear the Muslim call to prayer echo through the dust-choked streets. In the market stalls of the Old City, the talk is in Arabic. Growing up, I had done my share of traveling through Israel, but I'd never been to Nazareth, a city that had no place in my mental image of the country. I was vaguely aware that there were Arabs in Israel, but they were invisible to me, absent from the cacophony of Jewish cliques and factions (the *Ashkenazim*, the

Mizrachim, the *kibbutznikum*, the miscellany of orthodox sects) whose noisy voices made up what I reflexively envisioned as an ethnically homogenous state.

In Nazareth, unlike the rest of Israel, people had been getting their news during the war not only from the Hebrew press but also from sources such as *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Manar* (the television station run by Hezbollah). Many of the city's residents also have relatives in Lebanon. Not surprisingly, the tone of discussion about the war was markedly different there, and the concern about who was dying extended beyond Israeli soldiers. "Our cousins live in Lebanon," Ehab Assad, an Arab Christian I met in a photography shop, told me. "It's my family under rockets."

Some rockets struck Nazareth itself during the war. A week or so into the conflict, a katyusha fired by Hezbollah landed in one of the city's poorer neighborhoods and killed two boys. On the website of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the victims of the recent war were listed one by one, you could find their names and photos under the casualties for 19 July 2006: Rabia Abed Taluzi, a pudgy-cheeked three-year-old, and his brother Mahmoud, who was seven. They were directly to the right of two Israeli soldiers, staff-sergeant Yonatan Hagazi, of Kibbutz Merhavia, and Yotam Gilboa, of Kibbutz Maoz Haim, both of whom were killed in Lebanon that same day. Scroll further down the list of Israeli casualties and you'd see that many of the other names—Doua Abbas, a fifteen-year-old girl from Maghar, a Druze village in the Galilee, Muhammed Fa'u, a seventeen-year-old from Tarhisha—were Arab.

"The rockets don't discriminate" is the lesson many Israeli politicians hoped the country's Arab citizens would draw from this, reinforcing a sense of unity and patriotism. But you could hardly blame the citizens of Nazareth for wondering whether the deaths of kids like Rabia and Mahmoud were viewed in quite the same way as those of the two soldiers next to them on the website, or for that matter of Jewish civilians killed during the war. In contrast to the neighboring town of Nazareth Ilit, which is predominantly Jewish, no sirens went off on 19 July to warn residents in Nazareth of an impending

attack. There were no shelters in which people could hide. “The state didn’t put us on the agenda for these things because we are absent,” Nabila Espanioly, a psychologist and women’s rights advocate who lives in Nazareth, told me. “Why were the children in Nazareth killed? Because they were playing in the street. Why? Because there were no sirens.”



It was only after spending time in Nazareth that it dawned on me that I had been wrong to assume that the profusion of monuments and military cemeteries in Israel and the centrality of the fallen soldier as a unifying symbol serve to bind all citizens together. This is true of Jewish citizens, but not of Arabs, who make up twenty percent of Israel’s population but don’t serve in the army. This segment of the population is “excluded from commemoration,” notes the scholar Avner Ben-Amos in his article, “War Commemoration and the Formation of Israeli National Identity,” “and thus also from the nation.”

It can hardly be otherwise, some would argue: Israel is, after all, a Jewish State. The nationalist movement my grandfather joined had an exclusionary strand woven into its DNA. Everything from the 1950 Law of Return, granting every Jew who settles in Israel automatic citizenship, to the national flag, graced by a *Magen David* and modeled after the blue-striped prayer shawl worn in synagogues, unapologetically affirms this. Beyond which, why shouldn’t Israelis privilege Jewish suffering? Before the state came into being, after all, the world didn’t seem terribly bothered by the piling up of Jewish corpses in endless persecutions and pogroms, even before the attempted extermination of the Jewish community in Europe. Given this, why shouldn’t Israelis feel entitled to care more about Jewish victims than non-Jewish ones?

Israel, though, also prides itself on being a democracy. The Arabs may have been invisible, but this is nevertheless how I grew up thinking of it—as a homeland for people like my grandparents but also a country that guaranteed, in the words of Israel’s Declaration of

Independence, “complete equality of social and political rights to all inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.” While it’s true that this assurance has often gone unfulfilled in practice, the exclusionary strand in Zionism has long been in tension with a humanistic current. In the 1990s, the balance appeared to be shifting in the latter direction. Israeli society was becoming more open and pluralistic, not least because the country seemed to be heading into a prolonged era of peace. On the heels of the Oslo accords and the 1994 treaty between Israel and Jordan, writers and intellectuals began talking about a society in which identity would be less anchored to ethnicity. Artists began staging plays and screening films that boldly challenged core aspects of Israeli nationalism, among them the sacralization of military service. The Israeli Knesset passed a Basic Law on Human Dignity and Freedom that the nation’s highest court invoked to strike down discriminatory measures against Arabs and to bar security agents from using physical pressure (that is, torture) when interrogating Palestinians. I remember visiting Israel during this period and thinking it was on its way to becoming, if not post-Zionist, certainly less insularly nationalistic than in the past—less prone to viewing the world as inveterately hostile, more welcoming of outsiders whether they were Jewish or not.

The atmosphere could not be more different today. Everywhere one goes in Israel now, the talk is of Hamas and Hezbollah, of a potentially nuclear-armed Iran, of a rising tide of Islamism that makes it necessary for Jews to band together in a world teeming with anti-Semitism. The climate of fear has swung the pendulum back in the direction of insular nationalism, to the point that not only Arabs but outsiders of any kind—European diplomats, human rights observers, members of the Western media—are assumed to be, if not anti-Semitic, at the very least unworthy of trust. It has led many Israelis to conclude that, since the rest of the world is only counting the other side’s dead—Palestinians, Lebanese—we should feel perfectly entitled only to count ours, not least because ours are dying to defend civilians from terrorists. It is this assumption that foreclosed discussion about the morality of the bombing campaign Israel carried

out in Lebanon in the summer of 2006. It is this that leads Israelis to see fallen soldiers and the victims of suicide bombings in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in a radically different light from the victims of violence being mourned in places like Beirut, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.



Most Israelis, that is. One evening during the war, I paid a visit to a woman named Robi Damelin. She lives alone in a second-floor apartment in Tel Aviv whose living room is furnished with a large orange leather couch, where she directed me to sit. She sat cross-legged next to me on a brown couch, smoking Marlboro cigarettes as she recounted an experience to which, alas, many Israeli parents can relate. A few years ago, in March of 2002, Robi received the news that her son, David, an officer, was shot and killed while standing at a checkpoint in Ofra, a town in the West Bank. He was there on reserve duty. He was twenty-eight years old.

Almost immediately, Robi received telegrams from members of the Knesset. "We share in your mourning and may God avenge his blood," the telegrams stated. The latter phrase is used frequently in obituaries and death announcements for Israeli victims of terrorist acts. It is meant merely to acknowledge that the victim died because they were Jewish, some contend. But it has also become a rallying cry in recent decades among Jewish settlers, some of whom scrawled the phrase on a cardboard sign near the grave of Baruch Goldstein, an extremist who in 1994 massacred twenty-nine Palestinians at the tomb of the Patriarchs, in Hebron. The glorification of figures like Goldstein mirrors the exaltation of suicide bombers by young Palestinians in places like Gaza City and Ramallah, where the deeds of "martyrs" are routinely celebrated and where, at funerals for the victims of Israeli military assaults, men brandishing Kalashnikovs invariably appear to fire guns into the air promising God will avenge the loss. ("With spirit and with blood we will redeem you, oh martyr," one such slogan exhorts.) In deference to the living, the dead are not allowed merely to lie in their coffins but are converted into symbols of

collective suffering and, very often, vehicles of wrath. The duty of their compatriots becomes, in the words of the scholar Valérie Roussou, “to inflict similar injuries on the people who originally did you harm; only in this manner can the memory of martyrs be honored.”

Robi’s grief over the loss of David was overwhelming. Yet the idea that his death should be avenged offended her, not least because David was a gentle-spirited teacher and musician who was a member of the Israeli peace movement. He had agonized about serving in the occupied territories, she told me, finally deciding to do so on the grounds that, as she recalled him explaining, “if I go I’ll treat people with dignity and so will all my soldiers.”

I had come to see Robi after hearing about her from a friend, who told me she was a member of an organization called The Parents Circle, a group of Israelis and Palestinians who meet regularly to foster dialogue and reconciliation, which have fallen radically out of fashion lately. The members of the group have one thing in common: all have lost members of their immediate family to the conflict. Earlier that day, Robi had been at a gathering of twelve Israeli and twenty Palestinian women from the organization. They met in Jerusalem for a potluck lunch and then broke into smaller groups to talk. One of the Palestinian women there grabbed Robi by the arm and placed a pair of photographs in her hand—pictures of the two sons she had lost. Even though the woman speaks no Hebrew and she no Arabic, Robi received the photos, looked at them, and felt the barrier of mutual wariness and suspicion that normally governs such interactions come down. “There’s a common denominator of pain,” she explained, “which opens up a sense of trust.”

As I listened to Robi, I wondered whether some Israelis and American Jews might regard her as a turncoat. Here she was, after all, the Jewish mother of a slain Jewish son—an officer, an educator—and instead of thanking the Knesset members for their telegrams and saying yes, by all means, go and avenge my son’s death, make them pay for my suffering, she was trekking off to meetings with Palestinians whose experiences held up a mirror to her own. She was muddying the lines that are supposed to lead women like her to

reserve their sympathy for their own people, to mourn only the Jewish victims of violence (just as her Palestinian counterparts are expected to do the opposite). Robi had, in fact, received her share of hate mail—emails telling her she deserved to burn in Auschwitz, messages denouncing The Parents Circle for providing aid and comfort to those who teach their children to hate and murder Jews. Was she not aware that this was how Palestinian youths were being encouraged to see members of her faith? In fact, she told me, this was among the reasons she appeared regularly before audiences of Palestinians to share her story. Many Palestinians have never met an Israeli “who is not in uniform or a settler,” she pointed out, and so hating Jews comes naturally enough. In a classroom full of Palestinian children one time, she recalled how a girl raised her hand and said to her, “your son deserved to die.” Robi felt an urge to bolt out of the room. Instead, she stayed and asked the girl if she had lost anyone in her family to the conflict. Yes, the girl said, an uncle. “I asked her how her mother felt and how her aunt felt and what color were the tears. I said that’s the same color as mine.” Afterward, the girl came up to her, and after talking further they embraced.

What the girl in the classroom had never encountered before was the face not of Jewish oppression—of the occupation, of tanks and bulldozers—but of a pain and vulnerability like her own and that of her relatives. Palestinians are hardly alone in this respect. A week or so after meeting Robi, I had dinner with a slender, soft-spoken Palestinian man named Aziz, who is also a member of The Parents Circle. When he goes into Israeli high schools to speak, he told me, the mood is nearly always hostile at first: the kids look at him and see a threat, a terrorist. They, too, have been taught to hate. Then Aziz tells the story of how his brother died of medical complications from beatings and abuse in Israeli detention, of how he grew up detesting Jews, of how he slowly shed the belief that revenge and violence are the answer, not least by meeting Israelis outside of the occupied territories who, for the first time, didn’t seem bent on humiliating him. Often, kids approach Aziz afterward and say, “If all Palestinians were like you, we’d have peace.”

“So I ask them, how many Palestinians do you know?” he said to me. “I’m usually the only one.” The lack of empathy such unfamiliarity breeds is no secret to Aziz, who credits his own transformation not to a shift in political views but to something more basic. “I chose to understand the other side is human,” he told me. “When you don’t know that, you’re happy they’re being killed—you don’t care.” Too many Palestinians refuse to take this step, Israelis feel. But are they alone? Every day in the summer of 2006, a few more people died in the Gaza Strip, victims of Operation Summer Rains, an Israeli military campaign launched in late June following the abduction of an Israeli soldier named Gilad Shalit. Were the dead in Gaza terrorists or civilians? I didn’t hear many people bother to ask. Every Israeli I met knew who Gilad Shalit was. There are thousands of Palestinians under Israeli detention—a fair number of them women and minors, the vast majority never having been formally accused or tried—whose names and identities are unknown.



After fifty-nine years of conflict, of being taught to view one another as enemies, of nurturing grievances borne of seemingly irreconcilable national goals, bridging the wall that separates Israelis and Palestinians might appear impossible. It is hard to resist concluding as much right now. The collapse of the Oslo peace process, the eruption of the Al-Aqsa Intifida, the wave of suicide attacks that swept across Israel a few years ago, the bombings, military incursions, and targeted assassinations in Gaza and the West Bank: all of this has led people on both sides of the conflict to see struggle and sacrifice not as a choice but an imperative, to grit their teeth and swallow the bitter reality that there is no alternative but more conflict and war. A decade ago, the most celebrated martyr in Israel was Yitzhak Rabin, who was shot and killed after descending the stairs at a peace rally in Tel Aviv. At the time, the air in the country was full of hope. Now, it is thick with disillusionment and despair, which explains why the center of political gravity has shifted to the right, why the rhetoric about

Arabs has coarsened, and why many Israelis appear to have concluded the only people they can trust are their fellow Jews.

Were I living in Israel, perhaps I would feel this way myself. Had I never left the country, perhaps I too would have been articulating the view Aryeh voiced at our dinner at the Italian restaurant: about how Jews can feel truly at home only among their own people. Maybe I, too, would be among those shaking my head at the unwillingness of Israeli teenagers to adopt the self-sacrificing spirit of their pioneering ancestors. There is, however, another danger, which is that those teenagers are taught to believe the only lives that truly matter are those of their coreligionists—that they come to view the tears of others as different from their own. Such a worldview might satisfy the short-term demands of a nation whose citizens feel under threat. But it is incompatible with another strand of the Jewish tradition, the ethic of tolerant humanism that elevates social justice above the particularistic claims of any group, including one's own. That strand includes the belief that, as Israel's Declaration of Independence states, human beings should be treated the same regardless of their ethnic or religious identity, and that what binds people together—or ought to—is a set of universal values that transcend the polarizing affinities of blood and tribe.

There is no point in understating how powerful the pull of such affinities can be, particularly in parts of the world embroiled in ethnic conflict and war. Drilled into the consciousness of every Israeli and Palestinian are “the fixed and banal mutual accusations among enemies,” the novelist David Grossman lamented recently, a frame of mind that makes it difficult to empathize “even a little” with people on the opposing side. Then, too, it is impossible to deny that the appeal of universal values is often greater in theory than in reality. Spend some time among Israelis and Palestinians and a notion with much abstract appeal—that these divided people should simply live together in one multiethnic state, discarding their nationalist agendas and dreams—will come to seem far-fetched. The fact is that neither many Israelis nor many Palestinians want this right now, not least because the idea of living in harmony has become increasingly

inconceivable to them. A tolerant universalism cannot be built on an edifice of mutual recrimination and mistrust.

But one could argue that it is this very fact that makes the work of groups like The Parents Circle—the work of nurturing empathy for the feared and hated “other”—all the more necessary. That, particularly in places where universal values have come to seem out of place, trying to see past labels is a moral imperative, an act of civic responsibility undertaken not because one no longer cares about the world beyond oneself but because one does. There is nothing soft-headed or selfish, much less un-Jewish, about this. It is, indeed, part of what has motivated many Jews in the past to participate in causes like the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the growth of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. And it is arguably the only way to preserve at least some measure of hope that there will be fewer occasions for mourning, on all sides, in the years to come.