

Letters from a Strange Land
The Crisis in Palestine: The Surgeon and the Sinners

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Of all the news that has come from Gaza in the last two years, one of the most disturbing accounts I've listened to was a recent interview with Nick Maynard, a surgeon who practises in Oxford and for fifteen years has been going to Gaza to volunteer in a hospital. Recently returned from Gaza, he said he had seen greater deprivation and a deeper crisis on his last visit than anything he had seen before.

What was different this time? Two things he said stood out starkly for me. First, that doctors—like him, volunteers from abroad—coming into Gaza had tried to bring baby formula with them. All of it was confiscated by border guards. Nothing else in their baggage was confiscated, only the formula.

The Israeli government has repeatedly said that the reason food and medicine is not reaching the people in Gaza is that Hamas operatives steal it as soon as it arrives. Whether or not that is true, Maynard's experience leaves no doubt that Israel is at least as culpable. What good reason is there to confiscate baby formula from a doctor? The only possible motive would be to prevent life-saving nutrition from reaching starving infants. If that isn't evidence of genocidal intent, I don't know what else it could be.

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The second horrific detail Maynard reported was that on this last trip he was seeing a particular type of injury over and over. In the past, he mostly saw injuries from explosives. This time, he was mostly seeing gunshot wounds, predominantly in pre-teen and teenage boys who had gone to food distribution centres to get supplies for their families. There were patterns to these, he said. On one day, they would mostly be chest wounds; on another, head wounds; on another, wounds to testicles. He explained (for the benefit of people like me, who didn't immediately grasp the significance of the pattern) that the boys were being used for target practice. It must take great skill to aim at something as small as a testicle and hit it, not just in one boy but several.

This, too, is evidence of genocidal intent, in two ways. First, people going to a feeding station to collect food cannot all be Hamas operatives. If Israel concedes that food shipments are needed, then it also concedes that people are hungry. Either everyone in Gaza is somehow connected to Hamas, in which case Israel is admitting it intends to starve the entire population, or not everyone is connected to Hamas, in which case Israel is starving the innocent.

Second, using civilians for soldiers' target practice proves intent to wound, maim or kill civilians. It goes without saying it's a violation of the Geneva Convention, since these boys were neither combatants nor happened into the midst of a battle and were wounded by chance. Shooting them in the testicles is, however, like the starvation of babies: clearly an attempt not just to kill the living, but to

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ensure there will be no future generations of these people. Again, clear proof of genocidal intent.

There is no need to elaborate on Nick Maynard's testimony with respect to the effects of Israel's policies on Palestinians. The sheer facts are damning. There is also, however, an effect on Israelis, one that is perhaps less obvious but in some ways, equally sinister.

When people think of wrongdoing or sin (if they are religiously inclined) they tend to think of A harming B. The wrong lies in the harm to B. Sin can't plausibly consist in this wrong alone, though, since Christians (and Jews, for that matter) believe that sin is also an offence against God. Although God can't be harmed as a human being can, if sin somehow wrongs God, sin must have a broader effect than on just the person A stole from, lied to, cheated on or murdered.

Nor is it only a matter of harming B's friends, family and neighbours, who are grieved at what A did to B. No, as far as Christianity is concerned, there is another wounded in this battle of sinners and sinned-against: the sinners themselves.

With each sin, we engrave a little more ungodliness, a little more un-goodness on ourselves and in the case of many of the sins we commit, mortar yet another brick into the stony wall of habitual wrongdoing. Tell one lie and it becomes easier to tell another, and then another. What Greek philosophy and Christian theology knew about habit, especially in its forms as virtue and vice, has been confirmed by contemporary behavioural psychology: acquiring habits, and, unfortunately bad habits, is largely a matter of repetition and habits have a way of taking up residence, not only in our actions, but in our psyche.

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Let's return to Gaza. This part of the story doesn't begin (as other parts of it do not, either) with October the 7th. Nor does it begin in the Knesset or the meeting rooms of the Israeli so-called defence force. It begins in schoolrooms. Nurit Peled-Elhanan, a professor at Hebrew University, set out to study the textbooks used in Israeli schools and her research tells us a lot about how we got to the wretched situation of contemporary Gaza. You can read about [her research](#) by going to but the short of it is that in the Israeli school system, textbooks have to be approved by the government and those government-approved textbooks—at least those in Hebrew, destined for Jewish children—consistently portray Palestinians as subhuman. The message of the non-humanity of Palestinians is conveyed not only through words, but also in the illustrations used in the books the youngest children are given. Since the school system is de facto segregated, ethnic Jewish children are formed in the habit of thinking of Palestinians exactly as the current government refers to them, as 'human animals'. (For a concise account of how Israelis are formed in the habit of dehumanisation, [click](#) here for an excerpt from a speech by Gideon Levy, the celebrated correspondent for the Israeli newspaper Haaretz. (Levy is, of course, not responsible for the headline that was placed on the excerpt of the interview posted on YouTube.)

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Research by psychologists and linguists on the effect of normalising the use of animal terms for human beings confirms that the cumulative effect of such language is

profound, as Nick Haslam's research has shown. Given the Israeli school system, this effect can only be widespread: if all ethnically-Jewish children are taught from textbooks that portray Palestinians as animals, then all of them are being subconsciously soaked in this ideology from an early age. The miserable irony is that the Third Reich used exactly the same tactic, referring to Jews as, for example, 'Ungeziefer', vermin. Slavs were also portrayed as subhuman and it's no coincidence that millions of Slavs also perished in the death camps.

Someone who has been drenched from early childhood in an ideology that characterises their immediate neighbours as animals will have little difficulty seeing these 'human animals' as something like 'Ungeziefer'. While vegans may have moral qualms about calling the pest control man to stop an infestation of cockroaches, wasps or rats, most people do not: vermin are a legitimate target of annihilation. Re-brand human beings as vermin and extermination becomes legitimate.

So one way in which habit forms the background to what's going on in Gaza is the involuntary carving out of ways of thinking: the well-worn paths of racial, cultural, or ethnic superiority shaped by the conventions of cultures, language, families and schools. Another means of forming habit is not involuntary, however: it's the repetition of action, actions which we ourselves undertake.

Israel, like some other countries (Switzerland, for example) has compulsory military service. Spending two years in the army is mandatory not only for men, but also for women. (Until recently there was an exception for students in religious schools but the Israeli government has recently sought to end this.) Military training can often be a powerful force in shaping the individual: the knowledge that one is dependent for one's safety and very life on the courage and concern of one's peers and superiors builds camaraderie and loyalty to the group. Knowing that your own skills of shooting to hit a mark may be what save you from being hit is a powerful incentive to hone those skills.

However horrific it is to think of Israeli soldiers using Palestinian kids searching for food for their starving families as target practice, it cannot be entirely surprising. Those soldiers are the products of a school system that repeatedly dinned into its pupils that Palestinians are not really human beings. They have grown to adulthood in a society where everyone they know is the product of that same school system. They undergo compulsory training and service in a context where critical thinking is not an option and reliance on the group is a matter of personal survival. Then they are given orders. While 'I was just carrying out orders' has not, at least since Nüremberg, been a legitimate defence for the commission of war crimes, it is a justification that many combatants have made in their own minds—and there just aren't enough war crimes tribunals to try every last soldier who with blind deference carried out an illegal order.

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Everything we know about habit indicates that while the first time a young Israeli marksman shoots a child trying to get food, he might find this difficult, the next time it will be a little easier, and the next, even more so. What we are seeing in Gaza, the nightmare unfolding before our eyes (to the extent that we are able to see it, given the

Israeli blockade of information and massacre of journalists) is not only the tragedy of a once-subjugated people inflicting similar horrors on a people they themselves have chosen to subjugate, but the horror of a nation that has practised dehumanisation of others in thought and is now so formed in this habit that systematically denying them basic human rights, using them for target practice and collectively starving them has been but a series of short steps.

The best outcome of the current conflict—the outcome of which most people scarcely dare to dream—is either a two-state solution or, less often, a one-state solution where Israelis and Palestinians live in a country with one rule of law, no segregation and real democracy.

The problem with either of these possibilities is: who would live in these states? Who would be the citizens of these new states?—new, even in the case of the Israel that would be one of the two in the

two-state solution, because it would not be the nation it is now, the one with the power to deny human rights to millions of non-citizens. Either the united state or the two states would be populated by a citizenry deeply wounded by over 75 years of either trauma or moral deformation.

The Palestinians who would live in either of these states would be scarred by decades of living under apartheid and martial law, with the harrowing recent memory of genocide perpetrated by their very neighbours. Many of them would be permanently physically damaged by malnutrition or the wounds inflicted on them or be amputees, blinded or otherwise disabled, with the psychological problems that often accompany all these conditions.

Those who caused the atrocities would also be damaged, however. There has for a long time been evidence that Israeli soldiers emerge from their compulsory tour of duty ravaged by the experience. The suicide rate of these soldiers is high and there is anecdotal evidence that many survivors turn to drugs. The families of the soldiers killed would suffer grief, at the very least, and quite possibly harbour anger, either at the Palestinians whom they blame for the war or for the government that forced their sons and daughters into it.

The deeper problem is that Israelis, including those who were non-combatants in this latest war, have been so deeply formed in the habit of dehumanising others. Israeli society consists of people who have accepted the mass expulsion of the original residents of their country, without compensation; have accepted and justified the apartheid and military courts for thee but not for me; the concentration camp that is Gaza, and now, the carpet bombing, calculated mass starvation, and cold-blooded picking off of hungry children by sharpshooters. All those same people would be the citizens of whatever state might emerge from this conflict. They would be people formed in the habit of wronging

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their fellow human beings in the cruellest ways, or who accepted the benefits of the wrongdoing perpetrated by their fellow citizens, or who have repeatedly justified wrongdoing. They would, in other words, be people mired in particularly ugly habits—and habits are hard to break.

Jesus of Nazareth once asked: 'What good is it to you if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?' Whatever the modern nation of Israel has

gained by its policies and cruelty, it has lost a good part of the soul it might once have had. As it is, it now has the soul of a nation founded on ashes, which then used that very memory of annihilation to justify the annihilation of another people.

The wrong done to Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank by Israelis in the name of Zionism is outrageous. The wrong Israelis have done to themselves in the name of Zionism is tragic.

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