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From Roots to Routes: Nostalgia in the Israeli-Palestinian Imbroglia

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Abstract: Multiple stories—diverging and converging—have always been the hallmark of human civilization. Single stories often risk stereotyping the paradigm that dismisses any possibilities of difference. When Dalia Eshkenazi proclaims in *The Lemon Tree* that “Our enemy is the only partner we have”, she utters a striking truth that is at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum. A “pessoptimist” state of affairs between the two Semitic communities avoids a simple either/or conclusion. But popular discourses seem to have missed this imbroglia as they present the clashes in absolute terms, that flatten experiences and overlook other perspectives. Here literary art comes to the rescue and supplants the danger of a single story, acknowledging multiple experiences of Arab-Jewish encounter that are not necessarily troubling. Examining *The Lemon Tree* as “positive discourse” of bonding stemming out of intense nostalgia for the land on either side, I argue for the need to render active what appears to be the underbelly of this struggle. Exploring the notion of reflective nostalgia against restorative nostalgia as a potential tool for conflict resolution that promotes and encourages mutual coexistence and dialogue, the paper attempts to modify the single gloomy picture of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the Middle Eastern sand. Brian science lends ample support to the notion of reflective nostalgia as the hippocampus in the mid Brian is seen hyperactive in both recalling the past and imagining the future. The paper, therefore, endeavours to explore and exploit this function of the brain as a strong psychological resource to initiate a possible project of compatibility.

Keywords: Pessoptimist, Positive Discourse, Reflective Nostalgia, Hippocampus

Nostalgia as a Dynamic Resource

Nostalgia as a function of brain qualifies to be a universal human trait along the lines of evolution that may have consolidated as non-neutral memories. Cenozoic mind configures the most revered and substantial organ which dominates the surrounding milieu of existence. The dynamic exchange between the mind and the medium internalizes the external mire of sensory inputs and then utilizes the various communicative cultural modes available to human dispositions for making itself intelligible. The nostalgic expression is, therefore, a kind of segmented translation, nonetheless, we must also confess the significant gain where translation becomes a creation in its own right. Fred Davis, the reputed sociologist offered a positive take on nostalgia when he proposed that it helped people cope with the major changes in life experiences: "encouraging an appreciative stance towards former selves; excluding unpleasant memories; reinterpreting marginal, fugitive, and eccentric facets of earlier selves in a positive light; and establishing benchmarks for one's biography" (Davis 1979: 35-36).

Walter Benjamin's vision of the angel of history, Angelus Novus in his famous essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" reinstates this inventive potential of the past memories. While the angel's face is turned towards the past, a storm from paradise irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned. Benjamin calls this philosophical meditation of the past as "progress". Facing past, after all, could not be an empty-eyed eventless vision. The angel in all probability appears to be in a state of nostalgia, who is at once a "collector of memorabilia" and a "dreamer of future revolution". This "dialectic of standstill" where multiple images coexist allows for the eruption of new geometries of time and space. In this framework of working, affection and reflection are not mutually exclusive states rather coeval and reciprocally illuminating.¹

Svetlana Boym came up with her revolutionary text *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), that posited nostalgia as a progressive tool that may galvanize individuals and society with an innovative set of ideas and reorganize the ways and means to resolve conflict both within and without. This conceptual shift in the understanding of nostalgia from a unidirectional movement with regards to time and space opened newer possibilities. The scientific mechanism furthers the claim where the two-independent memory system, amygdala ("which is responsible for emotive influence") and hippocampus ("the memory bank") is seen

conversing in an exceptionally friendly way, leading to a sensitized synapse. It plays a key role in modulating our social behaviour and efficacy. The hippocampus in the midbrain is found hyperactive in both recalling the past and imagining the future² thereby leading to a possibility of linking nostalgic memories to futuristic goals. This sharing of "neurological substrate" causes the release of "feel-good chemicals" like dopamine, that elicits optimism and boosts self-esteem. It often promotes decisions that enhance experiences of possible positivity. The repeated stimulation of the hippocampus also helps in developing stronger neuronal connections, a process crucial to both learning and memory. Further, the state is enhanced in a stimulated, enriched environment (i.e. Nostalgic state) that also has the advantage of persistence in the offspring. Nostalgia, therefore, serves as a resource to psychological and social well-being extending widely on the time-scale.

Nostalgia in the Israeli-Palestinian Context

Nostalgia has proven to be a strong psychological resource in the Israeli and Palestinian land. The two thousand years old history of Jerusalem, a semblance of the three major Semitic religion has been the locus of their nostalgic underpinnings. For Jews, "God's chosen people" nostalgia provided them with the needed existential hope for survival when the reality of anti-Semitism in the major parts of Europe seems to destroy them. Their national anthem *Hatikva* ("hope") which was composed some seventy years before the creation of Israel is as strong testimony of their intense nostalgia: "A Jewish Soul yearns . . . Our hope is not yet lost, the hope of two thousand years, to be a free people in our land . . . of Zion and Jerusalem." (Tolan 2007: 138-139). History has been witnessed to their tears of longing when they sat by the waters of Babylon and remembered Zion, the envisioned paradise of Jerusalem. Such spiritually charged nostalgia was nurtured all through with every coming generation of the Jewish population. Despite their diverse linguistic, cultural and regional background what united the Jews throughout the world was this intense longing for Zion.

Palestinian population, majority of whom were made refugees after the war of 1948 developed a strong feeling for their homeland. Having lived their lives for all the known histories in Palestine their historic nostalgia for the land was a natural consequence of their lived experiences. In a short sequence in the movie Munich (2005) when Avner Kaufman, a Mossad agent of German-Jewish descent asks Ali Hassan Salameh, who orchestrated the Munich massacre (1972): "Tell

me something Ali, do you miss your father's olive trees? Do you really think you have to get back all that?" To which he replies: "it absolutely is, home is everything". The brief shot with Ali's deep nostalgic eyes reflects the strong feelings for the land the Palestinians carry along with themselves in every refugee camps of their dwelling.

Boym points out that though the longing is a largely universal trait, nostalgia can be divisive. Interestingly enough in the Israeli-Palestinian context, both communities carry strong feelings for the same land. Despite the nature of their longing which differs, the *nostos* and *algos* of their experiences are analogous and not necessarily divisive. Hence, there are high chances of mutual co-operation between the two groups, provided they acknowledge and understand each other's sentiments.

The Lemon Tree: A Journey from Frozen Past to a Sprouting Future

A non-fiction narrative, *The Lemon Tree* (2006), authored by Sandy Tolan, Professor of Journalism explores the human side of what many consider the world's most intractable conflict—the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum. The book provides a comprehensive view of the conflict by creating a multilayered narrative which blends personal narratives with the national history. Dalia Eshkenazi and Bashir Khairi, representing the opposite camps are two people trying to get beyond denial, closer to a truth they can live with. Towards the end, they are still arguing, but their nature—passionate, committed and humane—presents a hope.

The "Lemon Tree" lies at the heart of the narrative. Planted in the backyard of the house in al-Ramla which was built by the Khairis in 1936, but later inhabited by the Eshkenazis in 1948, the sweet aroma of the fruit binds the senses of the two families together. The significance of lemon is well explained by Bashir in the narrative: "To us this lemon is more than fruit, Dalia . . . It is land and history." The nostalgia for the land on either side is the most dominant mode of negotiating with their reality which deserves serious critical attention. Bashir posits the rhetoric question to his claims over the land:

Who is more entitled to a reunion, Dalia? Sharansky, the Russian who doesn't have a cultural-linguistic historic attachment to Palestine? Or the Palestinian Bashir, who is attached to Palestine with the language, culture and history, family and the remains of my palm that I left in Palestine? Does not the world owe me the right to reunite myself, to reunite my palm with my body? Why

do I live without my identity and without my homeland
while my palm remains in Palestine? (Tolan 2007: 327-
328)

In response to Bashir's claim, Dalia puts her version of the narrative that is equally legitimate: "To me Zion is an expression of my very ancient longing, for me, it's a word that symbolizes a harbour for my people and our collective expression here." Analyzing closely the two just claims from either side we find an intense passion for the homeland. The two communities seem deeply and closely related to each other with their share of nostalgia, one spiritual, the other historical. Given the fact of this profound interdependence, the only viable and desired future appears together. Dalia puts it subtly: "This is a kind of war that no one can win, and either both people will achieve liberation or neither will." There is a need to transform the tragedy into a "shared blessing" so that the next generation delights in the "beauty and the bounties of this holy land" (Tolan 2007: 328, 304, 305).

Boym distinguishes between two kinds of nostalgia: Restorative and Reflective nostalgia. Where the former endeavours to patch up every shred of memory to rebuild the lost home, the latter lingers on ruins, acknowledging the irrevocability of the past. The triggering factor for both states might be the same, but the narratives are different. Boym rightly says, "unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters" who are ready to die and kill for the whims of their "phantom home". Yet the sentiment itself of melancholy and a sense of temporal irreversibility is not harmful. Informed nostalgia maintains an ethical dimension which resists the paranoid projection of nationalist nostalgia. Dalia understands the need for such inclusive, reflective nostalgia for the "holy land" as restorative nostalgia can be extremely treacherous: "If you say everything is all Palestine and I say everything is the whole land of Israel, I don't think we will get anywhere . . . Each side has an ingenuity for justifying its own position. How long shall we perpetuate this vicious circle? (Tolan 2007: 387, 303). Located in the post-victory (or otherwise called post-defeat world), there is a need to cash in the potentialities of reflective nostalgia for a peaceful and prosperous future: "we couldn't find two people who could disagree more on how to visualize the viability of the land...[yet] they are so deeply connected. And what connects us? The same thing that separates us. This land" (Tolan 2007: 390).

The conflict between the two communities involves both rational and non-rational elements. Where on the one hand they have disputes

over pragmatic issues like finance, security, resources, political independence or even the division of land, on the other hand, they contest over emotive factors like fear, loath, honour, historical myths and narratives etc. Israeli Jewish culture given the Holocaust experience and other atrocities in the history insist upon resisting any signs of weakness. Their pledge "Never Again"³ to be at the mercy of the adversary bent on ethnic elimination lies at the core of Israel's foreign policy. Similarly, for Palestinians, honour and humiliation are recurring thoughts in their upbringing: "the central trauma was not in selling off a gold or finding enough to eat. Rather, it lay in the longing for home and, conversely, in the indignity of dispossession" (Tolan 2007: 159). Bashir remembered the guilt of his father's inability to invite friends and offer them Arabic coffee which was a symbol of hospitable gesture and being at home in their refugee tents for the rest of his life. Thus, a conflict marked by such cultural and historical biases requires a transformation of the mental state on either side, which no miracle, but the magic of human touch can solely bring in. As Amos Oz rightly says "A conflict begins and ends in the heart and minds of people, not in the hilltops" (Zahav 2011: 8). The general mass of the population on either side at the grassroots level first needs to be engaged with as negotiating participants, then only the soil would be fertile enough for sowing the seeds of peace. Unfortunately, so far in most peace agreements least amount of attention is given to the latter, which nonetheless hinders the success of the former.⁴ These multilayered sites of contestation need equal attention for a sustainable peace agreement.⁵

Albert Einstein, the famous physicist, called for "sympathetic cooperation" between the two Semitic communities, who "may have a great future in common." The intimate exchanges between Dalia and Bashir are testimonies of complementation that can only happen between a Jew and an Arab: "We can see ourselves in you, Bashir. We can remember our own history of exile for thousands of years. I can understand your longing for home because of our own experience of exile" (Tolan 2007: 244). Dalia began considering her longing for Eretz Yisrael (Land of Israel) with Bashir's commitment to Arde Falastin (Land of Palestine). She felt that a conversation based on "common history and mutual interest" was not so impossible. The three Abrahamic religions, after all, share a common heritage and resource of ethics which may smoothen the current mishappenings.

What is important to note in the narrative is the continuous exchange between the two-people belonging to the opposite camps. Even though Dalia and Bashir kept on contradicting each other they believed in the process of dialogue: "the conversation itself is worth protecting" (Tolan 2007: 248). Hans Georg Gadamer, the German philosopher talks about the idea of "fusion of horizons" that embracing our finitude and partial claims on knowledge emphasizes upon the dialogic model of understanding.⁶ This willingness to hear other's voice is a harmonizing key to suspend prejudices and create a new, syncretic language altogether. Dalia realizes the intense feeling of nostalgia the Palestinians carry for their homeland:

My love for my country was losing its innocence . . . some changes in perspective was beginning to take place in me . . . Ever since I met you, the feeling has been growing in me that, the home was not just my home. The lemon tree which yielded so much fruit and gave us so much delight lived in other's people heart too." (Tolan, 2007: 301-302)

This acknowledgement of other's "memories and tears" is a compassionate gesture that overrides the sense of threat in perceived differences. Taking cues from Hegelian dialectics, the dialogue appears to be an organic gift of nature that connects the two otherwise disjointed communities of people. The tension between thesis and anti-thesis often leads to a synthesis that overrides the initial position of both parties. It is true that no problem can be solved with the same level of consciousness that gave rise to it. Dialogue helps in causing thaw in an incessant state of combat. Healing has to come from both within and without. So, soft and hard powers should work in corroboration to bore sustainable results. Dalia wanted to make this intense relationship between her and Bashir a microcosmic vision for the conflicted land and its people: ". . . you know that I care for the Palestinian people. And I also need to know that you care for my people. Because that would make me feel so much safer. Then we could move on. We could create reality together" (Tolan 2007: 390). Here we sniff the non-rational elements of the contestation which desires protection.

Thomas Stearns Eliot, one of the twentieth century's major poet in his best-known essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919) presented the idea of tradition as a dynamic entity, which keeps on developing with the changing times. The overpowering organic inheritance of the

grievances on either side of the divide in the Israeli and Palestinian context but seems to throttle "individual talent" of the coming generations. It has led to a static state of suffocating division that desires a fresh perspective for revocation. Dalia understands the importance of friendly demonstrative gestures as in the very first encounter with Bashir in the vicinity of her home, she appears extremely humane: "She knew that if she told them to come back later, she might never see them again. Yet if she opened the door, she might not be able to close it" (Tolan 2007: 233). Opening the door that has long been closed is the beginning of Dalia's quest towards understanding the other side. Breaking the contained stereotypes, she is able to relish the human-ness of Arabs in Bashir's refugee camp where she was humbled by their generosity and treat. Similarly, Bashir possesses a soft corner for Dalia over and above her ethnic identity. He takes care of her security when she visits him in the camp. Positioning suffering as an ontological priority, Dalia and Bashir were able to suspend judgement and engage in a meaningful dialogue. It brings us to the notion that individual freshness does possess the ability to override inherited hatred. Creating a shared future is not that difficult after all, given the reality of peaceful co-existence between the two communities in the near past.⁷

At the heart of *The Lemon Tree* lies this conviction that "personal dialogue" is key to transformation in Israeli-Palestinian conundrum. Dalia and Bashir use their experience to deal with future challenges. Acknowledging the depth of rival claims they turn the property into an "Open House", a kindergarten for the Arab children and a centre for Arab-Jewish dialogue. Using the house for the service of community presents an act performed under the impact of reflective nostalgia, that receives and not retrieves the past. Stitching a future together with shattered pieces of history is a step fraught with sensitivity and critical thinking. Bashir justifies the solution of the house in serving the future generations: "I want them to have the childhood that I never had. What I lost there, I want to give them" (Tolan 2007: 286-287). The "Open House" therefore makes an excellent flambeau of love for the future generations which is necessary for peace, progress and prosperity of both communities.

Mahmoud Darwish, the revered Palestinian poet and writer believed in democratic worldview for real tranquillity: "Peace is a dialogue between two stories, none of which should be imposed on either party. My country has two names: Palestine and Israel, and my dream is to

build one shared history on the same land" (Brenner 2004: 137). In principle, the idea of pluralism has been present in Israel since its creation. The Declaration of the Independence of the State of Israel (1948) is committed to "ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex" and also "guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture". In the case of treatment with the Palestinians, we find neglect of such pluriversality. We, therefore, need to turn the theoretical teachings into practical expression in the Holy land given the heterogeneous nature of its demography.

Future Implications

As a "virtual key" that opens the knot of all-pervasive disconnect, nostalgia in the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum appears to be of significant importance. The two communities who equally feel attached to the holy land need to cash in their "shared blessings" to create a prosperous future. As an old Persian story suggests, the "lemon" is a magical fruit—the juice can work wonders but the seed is extremely harmful. The "Lemon Tree" in fact turns into a metaphor for nostalgia that the two families experience for the same house. Dalia rightly proclaims towards the end: "Our enemy is the only partner we have" (Tolan 2007: 390). Israelis and Palestinians share this deep sense of belongingness with regards to their territory that is unparalleled in history. Reflective nostalgia, as a unique semblance of sensitivity and sentimentality, would help them to squeeze the juice out of the lemon, leaving behind the deleterious seeds. When the lemon tree dies in the backyard in 1998, on the fiftieth anniversary of Independence, Dalia along with some teenage Arab and Jewish children planted a sapling of another lemon tree just next to the original spot. She believes past memories need critical investment in the present to bear fruits in future: "This dedication is without obliterating the memories. Something is growing out of the old history. Out of pain, something new is growing . . . we are entrusting both the old and the new" (Tolan 2007: 392). The very act of involving the youngsters of the two communities in the shared planting ceremony is a metaphoric gesture of "entrusting" future in their hands. It's a beautiful expression of handing down a syncretic legacy of the two communities who are meant to be together. Israelis and Palestinians are the two communities who need to accept their fate as neighbours and it can bring wonders to their blessed land.

Stephen Hawking, the celebrated theoretical physicist once said that mankind's greatest achievements have come about by talking, and its greatest failure by not talking. We, therefore, need alliances of those who dare to extend their vision beyond the "improvising perspectives of what the partition and separation can offer".⁸ We need to move beyond these "makeshift measures" and invest in sustainable peace for the sake of prosperity of the two communities. Though there is no assurance that peace can be solely achieved by relying on these emotive factors, but ignoring it is definitely an impediment in the success of reconciliatory practices. Wisdom more than justness is desirable for negotiations in such situation, as Dalia acknowledges: "In a peace plan, everybody will have to do with less than they deserve" (Tolan 2007: 318). Healthy compromise is the key to a happy life.

The tool of "reflective nostalgia" has proved helpful in imparting direction and impetus for the possibilities of dialogue, understanding and compassion in the context of the larger world. The joint walk of North and South Koreans to the winter Olympics recently was a great demonstrative measure to promote harmony between the two countries who have had a shared history. Similarly, the fall of the Berlin wall after three decades of physical division between the capitalist West and the communist East reunited the Germans. There was an impromptu and massive celebration, with people hugging, kissing, singing, cheering and crying from either side. It is therefore imperative to realize that shared past helps to prepare the ground for dialogue and peace in a substantial way. It acts as a kind of natural vaporizer to melt away strangeness and ignorance on either side. As Bishop Modeus in Vaxjö, a city in Sweden recently responded affirmatively regarding the proposal of Muslim adhan alongside the church bells by local communities. He said it would help to know the people who are "different" and then discovering that they are not so different after all.

Muslims, Christians and Jews in the holy land have lived together for centuries. They are in fact a cause for each other's nostalgic underpinnings as the shifting demographics—one group of people overtaking the other—of the land demonstrates. After all, Rumi put it best: "Christian, Jew, Muslim, Shaman, Zoroastrian, stone, ground, mountain, river, each has a secret way of being with the mystery, unique and not to be judged" (*The Fountain* Nov/Dec 2017, 59). It is this very incommensurability which gives dialogue its power.

We, therefore, posit nostalgia beyond its present frozen framework as a progressive tool, that may reorganize the ways and means to resolve conflicts both within and without. Let us explore, amplify and suggest probable applications of this human trait in emulating a kind of "covalency" wherein bonding atoms share their outermost electrons without losing the respective identities while forming a useful product. Let us innovate behavioural octet.

ENDNOTES

1. Benjamin's memorial in Port Bou, Spain, is interestingly a projection of a similar state of "affective contemplation", wherein a chimney like passage there is no end or exit. Rather, reflective glass is placed towards the end, which illuminates profanely the back alleys one has trodden so far and it also works as a thin sheet of the screen for the transient beauty that the front holds for the traveller, the scenic beauty of tides.
2. D. L. Schacter et al., in "The prospective brain: remembering the past to imagine the future" talks about the "common core network" engaged in remembrance and imagining which presents the possibility of constructive future on the basis of past experiences.
3. Meir Kahane, founder and leader of the Jewish Defense League and later of Israel's Kach Party popularized the punch slogan "Never Again" that quickly became part of a violent U.S political campaign against enemies of the Jewish people.
4. Frederic S. Pearson in his article "Cultural factors in peace-making: the Israeli-Palestinian context" suggests cultural factors "complicate and impede" implementation of peace processes. He calls them "structural barriers" as it consists of either party's faith and belief system.
5. Handelman, Brown, and Pearson in "A Palestinian-Israeli Public Assembly" suggest the importance of peace-making levels through the metaphor of a tree. The top level consists of government officials, the mid-trunk of regional organizations and the grassroots level of citizens and ethnic group members.
6. In his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer, shows how understanding a text or an event, which mostly comes to us through the lenses of our own history and horizon can be construed dialogically with subjective experience with the other.
7. Menachem Klein's book, *Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Hebron* suggest a shared past between the Jews and Muslims in Palestine. It offers a map of the oft-forgotten history bringing to the fore the possibilities of a shared future.
8. Edward Said in his article, "What can separation mean?" suggests the on-ground reality of the population on the land of Israel and Palestine, where the two communities live "between each other". He cites the example of the area between Ramallah and Bethlehem where 800,000 Israelis and

Palestinians live in close proximity. Any kind of partition plan is thus difficult to execute given the reality of life there.

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