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'Myth of Exile': Justifying Slaughter in Gaza



The 'myth of an exile' is 'taught to members of the Israeli armed forces.'

By Janine Roberts

Many have been appalled by the seemingly mindless orgy of destruction of families, children, homes, streets, shops and orchards in Gaza carried out by the Israeli armed forces. It left me wanting to know what has happened to make ordinary well-educated Israelis think that it is morally right to do this to their comparatively unarmed neighbors?

I perhaps stumbled on part of the answer in the bookstore at Tel Aviv airport on a recent visit to Israel. A map on display marked all the land from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea as Israel: there was no West Bank, no Gaza Strip. A travel book I admired for its photos of a beautiful land also described it all as Israel. Jericho was in Israel it stated, although deep inside the West Bank.

If this bookstore is as typical as I suspect, then most Israelis are convinced they already own the lands now occupied by Palestinians. It is as if they see them, not as a sovereign people, but as a host of unwelcome and unruly tenants squatting Jewish lands. If this is so, then I thought there is little hope for a "Two State" solution.

This view is deeply rooted in an Orthodox Judaism with increasing influence in the Israeli military. A booklet issued by the Jewish Rabbinate to the troops going to Gaza, "Daily Torah studies for the soldier and the commander in Operation Cast Lead," states there is "a biblical ban on surrendering a single millimeter of it [Israel] to gentiles, though all sorts of impure distortions and foolishness of autonomy, enclaves and other national weaknesses. We will not abandon it to the hands of another nation, not a finger, not a nail of it."

Another publication distributed by the military Rabbinate asks: "Is it possible to compare today's Palestinians to the Philistines of the past?" It cites a Rabbi as answering: "A comparison is possible because the Philistines of the past were not natives and had invaded from a foreign land ... They invaded the Land of Israel, a land that did not belong to them and claimed political ownership over our country ... Today the problem is the same. The Palestinians claim they deserve a state here, when in reality there was never a Palestinian or Arab state within the borders of our country. Moreover, most of them are new and came here close to the time of the War of Independence."

Both of the above quotes are from the "Books of Rabbi Shlomo Aviner," the head of the Ateret Cohanim yeshiva in an Israeli occupied house within the Muslim quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem.

The IDF rabbinate also quotes Rabbi Aviner's advice to troops: "When you show mercy to

a cruel enemy, you are being cruel to pure and honest soldiers. This is terribly immoral. These are not games at the amusement park where sportsmanship teaches one to make concessions. This is a war on murderers."

Such teachings are by no means confined to the military. A January issue of *Olam Katan* [Small World], a weekly publication distributed at Orthodox synagogues, cites the former Sephardi Chief Rabbi, Mordechai Eliyah as ruling that since the civilians of Gaza failed to stop the rocket attacks, they share responsibility for them and so must not be spared from attack.

When the *Jerusalem Post* asked the son of this Chief Rabbi, Shmuel Eliyahu, the chief rabbi of Safed, what further advice his father would have, he replied that his father would say no Israeli soldier should be put into danger but instead there should be "carpet bombing of the general area from which the Qassam rockets came." "If they don't stop after we kill 100, then we must kill a thousand." Rabbi Eliyahu added: "And if they do not stop after 1,000, then we must kill 10,000. If they still don't stop, we must kill 100,000, even a million. Whatever it takes to make them stop."

The distribution of such literature has been greatly expanded by the current IDF Chief Rabbi, Brigadier General Rabbi Avichai Ronski, through his Jewish Awareness Department headed by Lt. Col. Zadok Ben-Artzi. The slogan currently used is "Jewish awareness for a victorious IDF." It is based on "understandings gleaned from the Bible and the heritage of Israel to enhance the army's ability to achieve victory." Formerly all troop educational work was done by the Army's Education Corps but the Rabbinate services now dominate, with the aid of funding from Elad, a major Zionist group funded by Americans that has enabled the Jewish Awareness Department to give its services for free, unlike those of the Corps, and to include free study weekends in Jerusalem.

But there is a cool calculation in allowing this. The military needed to keep the number of Israeli deaths to the minimum if they were to retain popular Israeli support, and decided this demanded the use of highly destructive tactics. *Haaretz*, a leading Israeli newspaper, explained: "During 2002's Operation Defensive Shield, in the Jenin refugee camp, disagreements developed among the different [army] units ... a battalion of the 5th Reserve Infantry Brigade, which employed relatively humane operating methods, suffered 13 casualties in one single day from an ambush and roadside explosives. After those incidents, everyone took up the 'Buchris method,' named after the commander of the 51st Golani battalion, Lt. Col. Ofek Buchris (today a brigade commander in the reserves)." This, the paper concluded, has led to "the IDF proceeding in Gaza in a slow, orderly, efficient and very destructive manner." Villages and suburbs were leveled in order to avoid the risk of ambush.

After the setting up of the International Criminal Court as the first permanent international tribunal for war crimes, the Israeli army has increasingly involved lawyers in its operations, in particular those of the international law division (ILD) of the Military Advocate General's Office. Daniel Reisner who headed the ILD for 10 years and now works for a major law firm in Tel Aviv, explained the "setting up of this court led to the commanders saying 'I might find myself in that court; where is my lawyer?' So it becomes natural for the military to put lawyers in places where they have never been before. This particularly started to happen, he added, 'when Israel started to assassinate Palestinians openly."

"What we are seeing now is a revision of international law," Reisner said. "If you do something for long enough, the world will accept it. The whole of international law is now based on the notion that an act that is forbidden today becomes permissible if executed by enough countries... International law progresses through violations. We invented the targeted assassination thesis and we had to push it. At first there were protrusions that made it hard to insert easily into the legal moulds. Eight years later it is in the center of the bounds of legitimacy."

The ILD staff at the military's Southern Command was strengthened and legal advisers sent to the Gaza Division before the recent offensive commenced. *Haaretz* reported: "ILD staff regularly attend the 'operations and sorties' meetings held on Wednesdays under the head of the operations division or the operations directorate. The legal advisers receive the list of proposed targets and the relevant intelligence material ahead of the meeting, prepare a visual presentation of their remarks and voice them in the time allotted; usually between five minutes and a quarter of an hour."

Months before the air force killed dozens of policemen on the first day of Operation Cast Lead, ILD debated how to justify this planned attack since it is normally illegal to attack a civilian police force. It was agreed that Gaza was an exception to the normal rule, since, according to a senior ILD figure, "the way Hamas operates is to use the entire governmental infrastructure for the organization's terrorist purpose." Thus the Gaza police was ruled to be a legitimate target, as were all government buildings, including the now destroyed parliament.

The ILD also ruled: "The [civilian] people who go into a house despite a warning do not have to be taken into account in terms of injury to civilians, because they are voluntary human shields." A senior ILD officer explained: "From the legal point of view, I do not have to show consideration for them. In the case of people who return to their home in order to protect it, they are taking part in the fighting."

A warning might consist of "a knock on the roof," meaning a shell fired into the corner of a roof.

The legal annex to the operational order for Operation Cast Lead states "as far as possible in the circumstances, the civilian population in the area of a legitimate target is to be warned" but it then adds, unless such a warning "is liable to endanger the action or the Forces."

What about a civilian who positions himself in front of a tank? The chilling response came from the ILD: "If someone stands in front of a tank in order to block its progress, he is

participating in warfare."

Reisner explained: "We defended policy that is on the edge: the "neighbor procedure" [making a neighbor knock on the door of a potentially dangerous house], house demolitions, deportation, targeted assassination; we defended all the magic formulas for dealing with terrorism."

The lawyers' advice in Gaza was sometimes marginalized. When they pressed for "a more orderly set of tools" to authorize the "flattening of large areas to flush out people in hiding," the general in charge, Yoav Gallant, known by the ILD as a 'wild man,' a 'cowboy' because he attaches little importance to legal advice, disregarded their modest qualms. Consequently soldiers reported: "they were destroying whole streets and neighborhoods,"

However some risk attaches to the work of the lawyers. "I have no doubt that to a certain extent, everyone who takes part in making a decision, the lawyer included, is a partner to the decision," Reisner said. He tells of how when "Three years ago I gave a talk at Cambridge University ... I got a phone call from the legal department of the Foreign Ministry. They said they just wanted to let me know that there were no threats to put me on trial in England."

A group of former Israeli soldiers called "Breaking the Silence" is currently gathering evidence of unacceptable behavior during the latest attack but has already published evidence from earlier attacks on Gaza. An officer from an "elite unit" told them of what happened during "Operation Rainbow" that destroyed the homes of over a thousand Palestinians in May 2004.

When he was asked if the war was like "a computer game," the reply came "Yes, [all the decisions were made] in two minutes." He was then asked: "You, as squad commander, took down half a neighborhood?" He replied: "Yes ... and generally it's a 21-year-old boy [who makes these decisions]."

It was, he explained, "our first time in the Gaza strip" and "we had terrible fear" of the local Palestinians. To take over buildings, we went in with "D-9 (armored bulldozer) and armored personal carrier. You don't enter without them. The D-9 arrives, surrounds the building 360 degrees [with a bulldozed trench] to check if there are no explosive charges, after that you punch out a hole in the wall..." "We call that the knock on the door." "We don't tell the occupants we are coming in...and we don't let them leave the building while we are in it (with our snipers on the roof)..." (Hamas were accused of doing the same – using civilians as human shields.)

He was then asked: "What were your firing orders?" "To kill anyone armed, or anyone doing anything suspicious, like bending down or something, that could be for laying a booby trap... someone who looks as if he's observing (our) tanks, stands and looks at any of our tanks, that could be from a window, from a roof top or from something like it. Fire to kill."

The soldier continued: "The most striking thing I remember from operation "Rainbow", was the feeling of lack of restraint. I don't have a milder description for it: an indiscriminate use of force... There was tremendous pressure from the command post...to act and not to wait. Not to be derailed in decision making by all sort of nonsense."

"What did the Operations Officer say at the end of the debriefing?" "Two things: (a) we showed them that the IDF can be brutal when necessary, and (b) we didn't let these left-wingers screw up our operation." (He was referring to the Israelis calling for peace.)

The New York Times reported of Operation Cast Lead on the 19th January: "The Israeli theory of what it tried to do here is summed up in a Hebrew phrase heard across Israel and throughout the military in the past weeks: 'baal habayit hishtageya,' or 'the boss has lost it.' It evokes the image of a madman who cannot be controlled..." It is meant to terrify.

Elad, the American-funded right wing organization that helps fund the military Rabbinate's Zionist literature, is also involved in expanding Israeli settlement in East Jerusalem and in controversial archaeological digs near the Old City of Jerusalem that seek to establish the priority of Jewish claims. Israel may well be the only country where archaeology has a place on a governmental Foreign Affairs website, where it is used to justify the claim that Jews has a right to this land that predates and replaces that of the Palestinians.

Israel rarely cites half of the text of the UN resolution that gave it its legal legitimacy as a state, UN General Assembly Partition Resolution 181 of 1947, for it also gave the same legitimacy to a Palestinian State – authorizing the Two State solution over 50 years ago, mapping out the territories that both states should hold, roughly half the land each.

It should be said that many Jewish people are opposed to the Orthodox fundamentalism. Henry Siegman, the former national director of the American Jewish Congress and of the Synagogue Council of America, holds that Hamas "is a religious nationalist movement akin to the Zionist movement during to its struggle for statehood" and asks: "Why then are Israel's leaders so determined to destroy Hamas? Because they believe that its leadership, unlike that of Fatah, cannot be intimidated into accepting a peace accord that establishes a Palestinian 'state' made up of territorially disconnected entities over which Israel would be able to retain permanent control."

"The state of Israel, and a government under me, will make it a strategic objective to topple the Hamas regime in Gaza," the Foreign Minister Livni has told members of her centrist Kadima party.

Yet Zionist historians recognize that the story of Israel's expulsion from the land by the Romans and its destined return, the central doctrine underlying the Israeli denial of the claims of the Palestinians, is but a myth.

This has come out in a current extraordinary controversy over a new work of history that

has come out in Hebrew and will shortly be appearing in English. It is *When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?* by Shlomo Sand. (Resling, 358 pages, NIS 94.) After 19 weeks on the Israeli best-seller list, it is being translated into a dozen languages and will be published in the United States this year by Verso.

According to this, the Romans did not expel the whole people from the land, as widely recounted. The 'Diaspora' of Judaism is instead mostly the consequence of the conversion of people from other nations, especially the Khazars of the Black Sea region, from whom most European Jews are descended. From his research, it seems that the Palestinians have more roots among the ancient peoples of the land of Israel than do most Israelis.

The book was greeted with a furious reaction from Professor Israel Bartal, the dean of the humanities faculty of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, but not for the reasons I expected. His review, published in *Haaretz*, did not attack the book's thesis, but the book's contention that Zionist historians have concealed the mythical origin of the story of the Diaspora.

Not at all, he angrily retorted, the story of the "conversion of the Khazars, a nation of Turkish origin, [is] in the Zionist Mikhlal Encyclopedia" as is the fact that Judaism was once "a missionary religion."

Moreover, he added, the Zionist "Toldot am Yisrael" [History of the Jewish People] explains that the number of Jews in the Diaspora during the ancient period was as high as it was because of conversion, a "widespread phenomenon in the late Second Temple period."

He then asks: "What is Sand trying to prove in this study? In his view, the homeland of the Jewish people is not Palestine, and most Jews are descendants of the members of different nations who converted to Judaism in ancient times and in the medieval period. He claims that the Jews of Yemen and Eastern Europe are descendants of pagans."

He makes no attempt to disprove this but retorts: "My response to Sand's arguments is that no historian of the Jewish national movement has ever really believed that the origins of the Jews are ethnically and biologically "pure." "Although the myth of an exile from the Jewish homeland (Palestine) does exist in popular Israeli culture, it is negligible in serious Jewish historical discussions."

I was astonished when I read this. Perhaps what he asserts is true in his academic circles, but entirely the opposite viewpoint dominates much of the popular discourse. The "myth of an exile from the Jewish homeland" is fervently believed in by most Jewish settlers in the West Bank, by Christian Zionists and is not questioned by most of the Western media. It is in the teachings of prominent Rabbis – and, as we have seen, it is taught to members of the Israeli armed forces.

From his testimony, the story that a Jewish nation once owned this land, was dispossessed and has now returned, is not nearly as well founded as I had once thought. It seems the term "Semitic" applies far better to the Palestinians than it does to the Israelis. Yet, this widespread myth, disowned by Zionist historians, is still being used to justify much ethnic cleaning and suffering. It is hard to think otherwise than that the Israeli authorities fervently hope that, through inflicting such dreadful 'punishment,' the remaining Palestinians will ultimately flee from their lands or become docile, allowing Jewish control in the name of a myth.

*- Janine Roberts has written for many major Australian newspapers and both the Independent and Financial Times in the UK. Her investigative films have appeared on the PBS network in the USA and on the BBC and Australian television. She was invited to testify at a US Congressional Hearing on Human rights in Africa and the blood diamond trade. Her latest investigative books are "Glitter and Greed" and the "Fear of the Invisible." She contributed this article to PalestineChronicle.com. Contact her at: [jan@janineroberts.com](mailto:jan@janineroberts.com), or visit her blog: [www.speakingloudly.blogspot.com](http://www.speakingloudly.blogspot.com).*

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