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The Dynamics and Impact of “Othering”

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INTRODUCTION

The trip to Israel has made me realize the extent to which the Israeli (Zionist) Jews and the Palestinians are reenacting a story that occurs a shocking number of times in Hebrew scripture—the story of oppressors taking land already inhabited by someone else. Certainly the Israeli Jews are not the only ones guilty of this—it has been a fact of life among every people throughout all of recorded history. But there are many layers to the story of the Jewish peoples that add to the complexity. First and foremost is the Jews’ unique connection and, in their view, God-given right to this particular piece of land. Compounding this sense of entitlement to the land is the unspeakable experience of the Holocaust that left survivors “homeless” and, from their perspective, unwelcome and unsafe anywhere in the world but in their very own homeland.

In this paper, I explore how the Zionist-Palestinian conflict touches on three key themes of Hebrew/Old Testament scripture: 1) the idea of being elected, “chosen,” or blessed by God (*chosenness*); 2) the emphasis on distinguishing and separating one’s community from those who are different (“*othering*”); 3) and the inevitability of those in power oppressing those with less power (*oppression*). My goal is to reveal the *cycle* of oppression: how chosenness leads to othering, and how othering leads to oppression. This cycle, I believe, can be instructive for helping us understand not only how we arrive at a conflict like the one that has been occurring in Israel over the past 60 years, but also how humans in general respond to diversity and otherness.

CHOSENNESS—Favored Sons, Blessedness and God’s Chosen People

Rival siblings and favored sons. The theme of rivalry and being the favored son begins early in Hebrew scripture with the story of Cain and Abel. At the outset, Cain is presumably the

avored son: his mother acknowledges his birth by saying, “I have produced a man with the help of the Lord” (Gen 4.1). Yet when Cain and Abel bring their offerings before God, Abel is blessed and favored by God, and Cain is not: “And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard” (Gen 4b-5a). Cain’s anger and murder of Abel sets off the pattern of human response to the “inescapable difference of being first and second, rich and poor, honored and despised, regarded and disregarded,”¹

This weakening of relationship and belonging among siblings occurs also in the parable of the Prodigal Son, when the elder son becomes jealous that the younger son receives the father’s favor. He distances from his brother in calling him “that son of yours” (Gen 30), and he resents his father’s failure to punish wrong-doing. We see the rivalry/favored-son theme occur in the relationship of Jacob and Esau, of Isaac and Ishmael, and of Joseph and his brothers. Even between Mary and Martha, there is a rivalry over who is doing the most important work. As this theme plays out over and over again in Hebrew scripture, humans compete for the love and favor of their parents, of Christ, and of God. Each sibling wants to be favored, to be loved the best, and some are willing to commit murder to preserve their place.

Blessings and curses. In the first few pages of Hebrew scripture, the Lord curses Cain for killing his brother, and so begins the cycle of being blessed or cursed by God. Certainly this thread is significant in Hebrew scripture, and the formula is set forth clearly in Deuteronomy:

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way I am commanding you today...” (Deut 11.26-28).

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 95.

The blessings and curses formula is possibly the most important theme of Hebrew scripture. Job confronts the idea head-on and, even when his friends try to convince him that he has somehow brought his sufferings upon himself (trying to keep the blessings-and-curses formula intact), he denies it: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at last he will stand upon the earth...” (Job 19.25). But even if Job’s message teaches us that there are no easy answers when it comes to God, the blessings-and-curses theology tends to be overpowering.

Jews as God’s chosen people. Finally, and perhaps most important, is the theme of election or chosenness that underlies all of Hebrew scripture—the people of Israel as God’s chosen people. When God tells Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse” (Gen 12.2b), He has “introduced the notion of hierarchy...now there are two groups of humans.”² This hierarchy among humans is in contrast to God giving humans dominion over other creatures but *not* over each other. This hierarchy also creates problems when it causes the Israelites to believe they are privileged, that they alone have access to God: “It is a state of mind which can make you say, ‘You may be very good people, but I am a bit better: you are all human beings, but I have privileged access to the divine.’”³ But election does not translate to superiority or the right to do whatever one chooses with the *imprimatur* of God’s blessing: “This idea does not indicate a feeling of superiority, but a sense of destiny...from the concentrated devotion to a task” given by God and watched over by the prophets, who warned that “if you boast of being chosen instead of living up to it...you will forfeit it!”⁴

Buber points out that when Israel conquered the land of Canaan, it did so “in the perfect and well-founded faith that it was accomplishing God’s will...,” the implication being that the elect or chosen must listen for the will of God, not their own will. He adds that “whoever makes

² Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 42-3.

³ Elias Chacour, *Faith Beyond Despair: Building Hope in the Holy Land*. (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2008), 62.

⁴ Martin Buber, *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 223-24.

the Election a move for haughtiness, whoever imagines himself protected and exalted by it,” is in danger of distorting and corrupting the sacred covenant with God.⁵

Relevance for Jews today. The themes of favored sons, blessings, and chosenness reveal a deep desire on the part of humans to be loved and protected by God. Underlying that need, however, is a deep desire to *understand* how to win God’s favor and blessings. It comes down to theodicy: Cain does not understand why God has regard for Abel’s offering and not his; the non-Prodigal son does not understand why his father allows the younger brother to return; and Martha does not understand why Mary gets to sit at Jesus’ feet while she works. In all these stories, siblings believed they were following the rules and, even when God tries to show them in greater depth how He works, still they do not understand. Surely Jews today must wrestle with the question (as we all do in regards terrible suffering) of why, when they did everything God asked, did their people have to suffer so terribly? And if this question cannot be answered completely, does it then become easier for those who have suffered to ignore the law that God gave us? Perhaps a failed theodicy is, in part, what makes it possible for the Israeli Jews to do what they are doing today.

OTHERING—Separation, Exclusion and Alienation

Separation and exclusion. When Cain responds to God asking him, “Where is your brother Abel?” (Gen 9) with his own question, “...am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 9b), he is saying, “I am I, and he is he.”⁶ Cain immediately sets himself apart from, and distinguishes himself from, his brother. In this story, we see the very beginnings of “othering,” the tendency to mark a separation “between ‘them’ and ‘us,’” and a prototype for “how all human beings tend to

⁵ Martin Buber, *On Zion: The History of an Idea* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 49 and 51.

⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 110.

behave toward others.”⁷ Throughout the Old Testament history, tribalism plays a significant role in the lives of the people of Israel. Time and time again, the Israelites set themselves over against others they encounter—surrounding tribes, their enemies, and their oppressors. Without this separation from others, the people of Israel would not be able to retain their land, maintain their faith, or—most importantly—define their identity.

Strangers in the land. In murdering Abel, Cain has lost his brother, who represents home, family, and belonging. He is “cursed from the ground” and forced to become a “fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (Gen 11-12). Through this one act, Cain becomes a stranger to his family, his home, the land and God: “By his own act of exclusion he excluded himself from all relationships—from the land below, from God above, from the people around.”⁸ Shortly afterwards, Abraham introduces the idea of being alien when he says to the Hittites, “I am a stranger and an alien residing among you...” (Gen 23.4), and he sets the stage for all those who come after him who live as aliens in the land of their oppressors. But no other narrative epitomizes the notion of being alien and homeless than the story of the Israelites wandering for 40 years: “And the Lord’s anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness for forty years...” (Num 32.13).

Relevance for modern-day Israel. Throughout their long history, the Jewish people have themselves been made “other” in the worst ways imaginable. They have been the victims of hate and anti-Semitism since long before the time of Christ. Archbishop Chacour suggests that “the fact of thinking of oneself to be one of the elect, and therefore different from others, often brings

⁷ Volf, 92-3.

⁸ Ibid, 97.

about jealousy and hatred...” and he wonders if the reason for anti-Semitism over the course of history has to do with the fact that Jews were chosen by God for a special destiny.⁹

Perhaps Zionists, out of the experience of their ancestors having been separated and alienated for centuries, learned that they can trust no one but their own people. The stories in scripture of the Hebrew people—in which they excluded others and they themselves were excluded—reinforce a way of life devoid of interdependence and foster a mistrust of anyone not a Jew. “Exclusion can entail cutting the bonds that connect, taking oneself out of the pattern of interdependence...the other then emerges either as an enemy that must be pushed away from the self and driven out of its space or as a nonentity—a superfluous being—that can be disregarded and abandoned.”¹⁰ In their present-day efforts to remove all non-Jews from Israel, Zionists are doing just this—making the Palestinians superfluous, nonentities, abandoned people. They also have made the Palestinians “other” by consciously fostering a misperception around the world of all Arabs as terrorists. And finally, the Zionists’ actions are separating and excluding them from the human family in the most extreme way.

OPPRESSION—Control, Oppression and Dehumanization

Controlling resources. At several historic sites we visited, Dr. Luker reminded the group that one criterion for any ancient civilization was access to water. Old Testament stories tell us that water can be healing and cleansing, as in the narrative of Elisha telling Naaman to “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean” (2 Kings 5.10). Even Abraham carries the life-giving powers of water to his people when he digs a well and plants a tree at Beer-sheba. And the entire story of Abraham and his descendants is one of

⁹ Chacour, 66-7.

¹⁰ Volf, 67.

the “struggles for control of the Promised Land, a fertility battle in the cradle of fertility.”¹¹

Throughout Hebrew scripture, those in power control access to important, life-giving resources.

Oppression. In addition to the isolation and alienation experienced by the Israelites, there are countless stories of enslavement and oppression—from the time of the King Jabin reigning in Hazor, who “oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years” (Judges 4.3), to the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. In this one conquest alone—Babylon overtaking Jerusalem—the Israelites experience destruction of the Temple and looting of their sacred objects: the temple is plundered, with the Chaldeans taking away the pillars of bronze, “the pots, the shovels, the snuffers, the basins, the ladles, and all the vessels of bronze used in the temple service” (Jer 52.18). They also suffer deportation to and captivity in Babylon for more than 40 years (Jer 52.28-30).

Relevance to Zionism today. The history of the Jews is a history of oppression that culminates in the most horrific form of dehumanization the world has ever witnessed. In spite of this fact, Zionist Jews in Israel today are imposing the same evils on Palestinians that they endured. The Israeli Jews are making the Palestinians homeless in the way they themselves are homeless; they are robbing them of their identity in the same way they themselves became nothing but numbers; and they are dehumanizing them in the same way they themselves were dehumanized. In addition, the Israelis are controlling the resources the Palestinians need in order to carry on productive lives (and trying to control the water between Israel and Syria, even going so far as to divert the water from the mountains away from Syria into the Sea of Galilee). Ateek (in quoting Ian Lustick) mentions three categories of Israel’s control over the Palestinians:

“Segmentation” refers to the isolation of Arab minority from the Jewish population and the Arab minority’s internal fragmentation. “Dependence” refers to the enforced reliance of Arabs on the Jewish majority for important economic

¹¹ Feiler, 61.

and political resources. “Cooptation” refers to the use of side payments to Arab elites or potential elites for purposes of surveillance and resource extraction.”¹²

Walking through the Yad Vashem Museum, however, it occurred to me that there are not categories of evil or sin in our relationships with others. Instead, I see all of the sins against humans falling along a continuum—from the entitlement chosenness or blessedness to the most unspeakable sin or murder and genocide:

- judgment, prejudice and bias
- ghettoizing, isolation and marginalization
- persecution, racism and ostracism
- destruction of property, despoiling material possession, plundering and looting
- enslavement and forced labor
- imprisonment
- exile, expulsion and deportation
- murder and genocide.

Each of these sins is a way of dehumanizing, making people less than human. But the irony is that those who dehumanize others must themselves be separated from their full humanity. In order to strip someone of their humanness, one must forget one’s own humanity. The Jews in Nazi Germany were dehumanized, and today their descendants are dehumanizing the Palestinian people. As Ateek points out, “...to become a conqueror after having been a victim is a recipe for moral suicide...to forget one’s own oppression is to open to the possibility of becoming the oppressor.”¹³ Archbishop Chacour, who acknowledges that “there was a time

¹² Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 38.

¹³ *Ibid*, 70.

when we Christians almost ceased to be human,” suggests asking the Jews “whether they think of themselves as, first and foremost, human beings.”¹⁴

The actions of the Israeli Jews, in addition to emerging from a sense of entitlement and divine right, perhaps also comes from a desire for revenge—to do to others what was done to them. Perhaps the Jews have not yet recovered their full humanity, not only because the kind of healing needed will take years, perhaps centuries, but also because forgiveness on behalf of others (in this case, the ancestors of today’s Zionists) is impossible. As Ateek points out (quoting Laurens van der Post), “...suffering which is most difficult, if not impossible, to forgive is unreal, imagined suffering.”¹⁵ But perhaps the actions of the Jews come from fear—a fear that this could happen again, a fear of what it means if God could allow this to occur even one time.

IMPLICATIONS—What Does This Mean For Us As Christians?

Cedar at Sabeel Peace Center reminded us that the organization’s peace-making exists on two levels: the educational and advocacy work they do “on the ground” and the theological work of “hope in God,” trusting that God will create a different future for the Palestinian people. This two-fold message is present in Revelation, the call not only to trust God’s kingdom coming down to earth, but also to claim and accept the responsibility we have for recognizing and allowing that kingdom right here, right now. God’s kingdom is not a reality far off in the future, but an alternative reality available to us right now.

From the perspective of the Palestinians and others living with violence and oppression, they must continue to resist those who oppress them while at the same time trusting that ultimately justice and peace will prevail over domination and oppression. Those of us who are

¹⁴ Chacour, 65 and 60.

¹⁵ Ateek, 185.

not living in an oppressive situation can participate in both levels as well—by doing advocacy, education, social justice, whatever we can to help, while praying for the day when peace will prevail. But at the same time, there is another level of responsibility I believe all of us must take as we move toward a future in which violence and oppression is no longer. We must take on the mind of Christ, not just doing what he did, but *being* like he was, seeing the ways in which we participate in violence in the world (if even on a small scale) and the ways in which we can contribute to peace. In order to do so, it is important for each of us to do the following:

- *Acknowledge the ways in which we make people “other.”* To some degree, each of us is guilty of the sins of chosenness, othering, and dehumanization. It is too easy to say that the sin of the Nazis and the sin of the Zionists is different from our own sin; the truth is that there is a kernel of this in all of us. When we judge others, when we take advantage of our position of privilege, when we believe we are more blessed than others, when we hoard resources—these are examples of the sin of othering.
- *Stand in solidarity with the oppressed.* I believe that standing in solidarity with the oppressed involves working to dissolve the boundaries that exist between ourselves and others who are different from us, not “helping” from a position of privilege and power, but joining the oppressed in their struggle for freedom. But it also involves entering into their struggle and suffering—not for the sake of martyrdom or even for the sake of joining them—but for the sake of *truly* understanding, in our heart of hearts, what their struggle is about. Can there be healing for the Jewish people if each of us does not truly see and understand the extent of their suffering? Can there be healing for the Palestinian people if we fail to recognize, at the deepest level of our being, the loss and suffering they have endured for 60 years?

- *Live out of abundance rather than fear.* If control, oppression, and dehumanization have to do with fear and a belief in the scarcity of resources, God's provision and God's love, we need to remember to live out of the abundance that Jesus represented. Through his acceptance of all people, his sense of abundant life, and his utter trust in God's goodness and love, he modeled a way of life profoundly different from a life of scarcity, fear, and domination.
- *Remember that we are all children of God.* Archbishop Chacour's message of hope for the future reminds us that "...we were born first and foremost as children, created in the image of God."¹⁶ We must remember that we all are equally blessed, all made in God's image, all heirs to God's love and promise. And, because we all are children of God, we have a responsibility to each other: "To reawaken is to discover oneself responsible for the other..."¹⁷
- *See the stranger as Christ.* Buber tells us that "every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the eternal *Thou*..."¹⁸—every human reveals God's presence to us. Strangers and aliens, in particular, represent Christ: "...all of us before God are 'aliens and transients.' Their presence among us is a source of mutual enrichment for humanity as well as an encouragement toward dialogue and unity. Moreover, their presence is a sign of the Risen Christ. When people of different origins are welcome, God is revealed."¹⁹ And Chacour encourages us to look at the faiths of others to see what we can learn from them, assuring us that this openness makes us *more*, not less, of who we are: "the more you become

¹⁶ Chacour, 69.

¹⁷ Lévinas, 114.

¹⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1996), 75.

¹⁹ Vincent D. Rougeau, *Christians in the American Empire: Faith and Citizenship in the New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 146.

Christian, the more you open your arms to include everybody.”²⁰ He urges us toward acceptance and the knowledge that “difference is an enrichment, not a threat.”²¹

CONCLUSION

During our visit with Archbishop Chacour, I was deeply touched by his story, but even more by his conviction about a peaceful resolution, his commitment to the children and to the people of Israel – Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The next day, when we visited Yad Vashem, I was able to better understand the context out of which the Israeli Jews are acting, and I felt the most profound sorrow for the evils we, as humans, are capable of.

I also was struck by the two walls that now characterize Jerusalem. To Jews around the world, but particularly those in Israel, the Western (Wailing) Wall is the very heart of Judaism, the sacred remains of the Temple that was once the center of their faith and their culture, and a holy place of prayer and praise. This wall represents God’s life-giving love. How ironic then, that not far from there is another wall, the one that separates Jerusalem and Bethlehem, erected by the Jewish Israelis to separate the Palestinians (non-Jews) from the city and to keep them from carrying on a meaningful, productive life in Israel. This wall represents the life-denying oppression of the Zionist movement.

Perhaps the two walls symbolize the choice humans have between hostility and peace, hate and love, sorrow or joy. I left Israel with a sense of holding the suffering of the people in one hand and hope in the other hand—and an understanding that the love in every human heart, the love that God is, can be the bridge that moves us from oppression to justice, from separation to connection, from violence to peace.

²⁰ Conversation with Archbishop Chacour, Haifa, Israel, December 17, 2008.

²¹ Chacour, 62.

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