Introduction

In the early spring of 1916, Daher Nassar stood on a hilltop in central Palestine. To his west he could see the coastal plain stretching to the Mediterranean, to his north the spires and minarets of Jerusalem, and to the east the mountains of Moab. Daher liked this piece of land, the highest point in the fertile hill country south of Bethlehem. For Daher, a Christian, it felt good to be close to the birthplace of Jesus and the ancient "Patriarch's Road" to Hebron. A lover of the land and its bounty, Daher could see in his mind's eye the terraces that would follow the contours of the hill. There he would plant the grapes that would glisten in the summer heat. He could imagine the orchards he would set out in the valley to the south, and the olive and almond trees that would soon range in rows along the crest and on the eastern slope. He thought of the shelter for his family he would find in the caves that dotted the hillside, caves used by Palestinian shepherds and farmers for millennia. Four hundred dunam—a hundred acres. Daher paid the price, signed the papers, and silently mouthed a prayer as he carefully placed the deed to the property for safekeeping: this is for my children and my grandchildren.

Daher Nassar, like his fellow Palestinians, paid taxes to the Ottoman sultan. And, like those other farmers and villagers, he saw the governance of the land pass over to the British Crown at the close of the World War. His sons, Bishara and Naif, who took over stewardship of the farm, saw British troops replaced by

Jordanian regulars in 1948. And, in 1967, Bishara's son Daoud witnessed the blue Star of David hoisted over the territory at the conclusion of the war in which Israel took control of the West Bank. The Nassars have lived and farmed under four occupiers: three kings and now Israel. Only this last ruler has tried to take their land from them.

It was early spring in 2009. I was sitting in a recording studio at the offices of National Public Radio in Chicago. To my right was Daoud Nassar, to my left my friend and colleague Bill Plitt. Bill and I had met Daoud while on an American interfaith delegation to Israel and the Palestinian territories in the summer of 2006. Along with several others, Bill and I founded a nonprofit to support Daoud's continued presence on his ancestral land and his work as director of Tent of Nations, an international peace center he had established on the grounds of the farm. We were on a speaking tour to educate Americans about Daoud's work and to raise funds to help him dig cisterns, install solar power, and buy a backhoe before the Israeli government, frustrated by Daoud's stubborn unwillingness to move off his farm, sealed off the last road providing access to his property. After some introductory questions, the host of the show asked me how it was that I had become involved in this project. "You mean," I responded, "what's a Jewish guy from Philadelphia doing defending the land rights of a Christian Palestinian farmer?" He smiled—of course that is precisely what he meant. I told him I had been horrified by what I saw happening to Daoud and his fellow Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli government. I told him that I had deep family ties in Israel, and that I felt strongly that the future of Israel's citizens depended on safeguarding the human rights of Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories. Working for justice and coexistence in the Holy Land, I had realized, was the only thing I could see myself doing as a Jew and as an American. The host, apparently no stranger to the heated controversy taking place within the American Jewish community over Israel's policies, followed up with the right question: "What's that been like for you? You must be getting some interesting reactions from your fellow Jews."

I had answered this question countless times since my return from the West Bank, sometimes without being asked. My answer had never been encouraging. The reception that I received from the established Jewish community whenever I talked about my experiences in occupied Palestine had been like a door slamming in my face. When I talked about my horror and deep concern over the injustice I had seen and the catastrophic impact that the conflict was having on both occupier and occupied, I was told by many Jews that I was disloyal to my people, that I had "gone over to the Palestinian side." I was informed that criticizing Israel made me an enemy of the Jewish people and that I was opening the door for the next Holocaust.

Some of the reactions bordered on the bizarre, going back to fears one would have thought we had put behind us: A rabbinical student informed his colleagues that I was obviously a convert to Christianity "masquerading" as a Jew in order to promote the destruction of the Jewish people. A reading of Israeli protest poetry that I had organized to be held at the local Jewish Community Center in Washington, DC, was cancelled when it was discovered that I served on the board of directors of Partners for Peace, an organization that was on the anti-Semitic blacklist of the local Federation of Jewish Agencies. A family friend, a young rabbi who said that he agreed with my assessment of the illegality and immorality of Israeli policy, declined my request to speak at his synagogue. His frank explanation was that if he were to allow me to speak there, he would lose his job. That's why, during the years since returning from my trip, I didn't have good things to say about the position of the American Jewish establishment on the question of Israel. I was hurt and I was angry, and I was aware that this was a problem. How effective could I be as an activist or writer if my anger at my own community leaked out, regardless of how justified that anger was?

But this morning I had a different answer. The previous day we had met in a Chicago suburb with a rabbi who told us that he could not celebrate Israel's Independence Day, the holiday commemorating the founding of the State of Israel, which was

observed on the very day we were meeting. Because of Israel's assault on Gaza, its human rights record in the West Bank, and its failure to take responsibility for the expulsion of three-quarters of a million Palestinians to make way for the state in 1948, this was not a day for celebration, he told us. Rather, it was a day for Jewish soul-searching. The story we needed to tell ourselves, he said, was not the story of our victory over our enemies, but the story of what the Palestinian people had lost as a result of our success in founding the Jewish state. The conversation had given me hope—hope that, although this was just a beginning, even the organized Jewish community in the United States might someday come to see that the very future of the Jewish people depended on our achievement of this level of honest self-scrutiny. It gave me some hope that maybe it was not too late to change course. So I had a different answer than my usual one that morning, and I was glad to tell that story to my radio host. Things are starting to shift, I told him.

I had let myself sound more optimistic than I felt. I had been doing a lot of thinking about my people and our national homeland project, and I had not been feeling good about the prospects for peace.

A Fatal Embrace

The Jewish people have always struggled with the tension between the universalism inherent in our ethical code and the particularism so deeply embedded in the cultural and historical narrative that begins with the Old Testament. Global politics is very much at play at this juncture in Jewish history. Since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, most Jews in the West have believed that their survival depends on establishing and maintaining hegemony in historic Palestine. For that reason, American Jews have erected a powerful apparatus of philanthropic, educational, and lobbying organizations devoted to maintaining the stream of financial and political support for Israel from the U.S. government and from private sources. We Jews want to have our cake and eat

it too; we want to see ourselves as universalist and humanitarian, in possession of a religious faith that is based on deep respect for human rights and a fundamental, defining commitment to universal justice. We also, however, persist in supporting the policies of the Israeli government, policies that violate the human rights of Palestinians, support the continuing colonization of occupied territory in violation of international law, and represent the most significant impediment to a peaceful resolution of the half-century-old conflict.

American Jews have not created this situation by ourselves. We have been enabled by our Christian compatriots, who, because of their sense of responsibility for historical anti-Semitism, feel that they have no right to criticize any actions that Israel may take, even when these actions violate principles of human rights and justice cherished by Jews and Christians alike. Buttressed by the vigorous support of the non-Jewish community in America for anything that Israel wants or does, United States government policy over the decades has remained firm in its unqualified support of Israel's policies of de facto colonization of Palestinian lands. These policies remain the main obstacle to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. It's a fatal embrace: these two powerful, deeply-seated forces—Christian atonement and the Jewish search for safety and empowerment—unite to help keep us stuck in Israel/Palestine. The persistence and power of these beliefs—the more powerful because they are unrecognized, unexamined, and even denied—have played a major role in thwarting progress toward a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

Voices of questioning and protest have begun to emerge, however. To an increasing number of Jews, here as well as in Israel, it has become clear that Israel's present course is tragically self-destructive, and must change if Israeli society is to continue and prosper. In addition, Christians on congregational and denominational levels have become concerned about Palestinian human rights based on what they have observed on their pilgrimages to the Holy Land and, increasingly, what they are reading about in the media and seeing on the Internet.

In politics, beliefs and perceptions are just as important as facts. In the case of the conflict in Israel/Palestine, issues of cultural and national identity and of religious faith play a central role. It is therefore crucial that in addition to knowing the facts, we examine the power of those influences that lie at the root of our Western culture and that play a direct role in the continuation of this conflict. The thesis of this book is that these beliefs play a major role in stifling productive dialogue and forward movement in the search for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. We will not have peace in the Holy Land unless we understand the power of these beliefs.

Contrary to the claims of some of my coreligionists, I do not "seek the destruction of the State of Israel." On the contrary, I am in great fear for its peril and seek to preserve Israel's accomplishments, culture, security, and, most of all, its people. I feel like two other Jews must have felt: the prophet Jeremiah and, eight centuries later, Jesus of Nazareth, standing before Jerusalem, weeping over the self-inflicted destruction they saw and the catastrophe to come. As I will discuss in the pages to follow, acknowledging the darkness and weeping over the brokenness is the key to finding a solution. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes in *The Land* that "'exile,' as either history or an ideology, has become definitional for Israel's self-discernment" (2002, xvii). Jewish liberation theologian Marc Ellis has written that "we must be willing to embrace Jews of conscience who are willing to…go into exile in order to combat the abusive practices of the Jewish state" (2001). I believe, along with Brueggemann, Ellis, and others who have thought deeply about issues of faith, peoplehood, and history, and who will be our companions on this exploration, that exile can lead to restoration and even renewal. What might be the nature of that renewal, and what it means not only to the Jewish people but to people of all faiths, is the question this book seeks to address.

As Jim Wallis of the Sojourners movement reminds us, when politics fail, great social movements emerge. This book is a call to action. It is my belief that if there is any hope for a lasting peace based on justice in the Holy Land, it will come about as a result

of a broad social movement, originating at the grassroots level of faith communities and activist organizations working for peace here and in Israel/Palestine. My hope is that, by calling on Jews to examine our own shadow and by helping Christians overcome their reluctance to question the actions of some Jews, this book will advance the emerging social movement needed to change Israeli and U.S. policy in the region.

A Note on "Balance"

One of the most striking features of this discourse in the United States is the preoccupation with the need for a "balanced" perspective. Here is how this typically plays out: you may not give out information about the abridgement of human rights in occupied Palestine, or talk about targeted assassinations, house demolitions, humiliating and life-threatening restrictions on movement, or any other examples of Palestinian suffering, without presenting what is usually termed the "other side." The "other side" is the recognition of the suffering of the Israelis, who are faced with terrorist attacks and the threat of annihilation. What is important here is not the apparent reasonableness of this argument. Of course, here in America, we are committed to fair play and the airing of all viewpoints. Rather, what is significant is the political context. In my experience, the demand for "balance" is almost always made as a way to invalidate and neutralize scrutiny of those actions of Israel that are, in my view, the root cause of the threat to its own well-being and survival.

The discourse, therefore, is handicapped by the seemingly unassailable position that there are "two sides:" the Israeli (or Jewish) and the Palestinian (or Arab). The world is thus divided into two camps, the "pro-Israel" and the "pro-Palestine." One must belong to one or the other. I am frequently assigned to the "pro-Palestinian" camp because I criticize Israel and talk about the abridgement of Palestinian rights. I reject this designation. This is not a struggle between good guys and bad guys, with the Jews as villains and the Palestinians as blameless victims, any more than it

is the opposite. The issue is justice. The issue is the fact that there will never be an end to the conflict until there is a full recognition and redress of the massive abrogation of human rights that accompanied the birth of the State of Israel and that continues to the present day. To tell the story correctly, you have to include the story that until recently has not been reported in our media, or from the pulpits of our churches (for the most part) or our synagogues. It is a story in which the power difference between the two parties to the conflict is painfully apparent, and the evidence of Israel's systematic project to accomplish the goal of ethnic cleansing and political and economic control over the non-Jewish inhabitants of historic Palestine is horrifyingly clear.

I am not alone in this; anyone who goes to see for him or herself—from former U.S. presidents, to South African human rights workers, to Israeli journalists, to American Christian tourists—arrives at the same conclusion. Christiane Amanpour, the award-winning CNN international correspondent, recently talked about the question of "objectivity" in reporting: "Objectivity means reporting the truth. It doesn't mean creating a false equivalent. It doesn't mean saying 'on the one hand this and on the other hand that.' It doesn't mean equating victim with aggressor. If we do that, then we are accomplices" (NPR "Fresh Air" interview, December 3, 2008). Amanpour here is describing the sleight of hand commonly employed to deflect and derail the discussion: presenting a situation in which the rights of one group are being denied by another as a "conflict between two rights."

Events and experiences drive our intellectual endeavors, our research, and our search for answers. This book arises from what I have seen with my eyes and felt in my heart. It is a response to horror and deep sadness. It comes from a Jew who is overwhelmed by the reality of Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestine, a project begun in the period 1947–1949, in the lead-up to and aftermath of the establishment of the State of Israel. The project to rid the land of its indigenous people continued with the opportunity afforded by Israel's victory in the Six-Day War of 1967, and was further

advanced through the blueprint for annexation and control served up by the Oslo Accords of 1993.[1] It continues to the present day in what can only be described as an orgy of settlement activity and rush to establish the necessary facts on the ground to precede the inevitable political settlement to come. This is the reality that drives and informs the writing in the chapters to follow. It is the reality that has set me on this journey.

About This Book

This book is organized in three parts. Part 1 sets out the basics of what I believe to be the barriers to achieving peace in the Holy Land. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the discourse in the U.S. over how to resolve the half-century-long conflict, and the issues it raises for the Christian and Jewish communities. In chapter 2, I tell the story of growing up Jewish in postwar America, and the crisis of identity and spirit that resulted from my encounter with Israel's occupation of Palestine. Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of anti-Semitism on Jewish history and Jewish experience today, while chapter 4 is a discussion of Zionism—its origins, consequences, critics, and defenders. This last chapter covers the efforts of several Jewish writers to understand the historical, psychological, and spiritual forces driving the actions of the State of Israel and world Jewry's support of those policies that many regard as barriers to peace.

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1. The 1993 Oslo Accords, or "Declaration of Principles," was the first agreement between Israel and political representatives of the Palestinians. It was meant to be the first step leading to an autonomous Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza and to normal relations with Israel. The Accords created the Palestinian Authority (PA), which would exercise various degrees of control over some of the area occupied by Israel. The Accords also established three zones: Area A, under complete control of the PA; Area B, under Palestinian civil control and Israeli military control; and Area C, completely controlled by Israel. Area C consists of Jewish-only settlements and "security zones" off limits to Palestinians. The Accords set a transitional period of five years leading to the resolution of the "permanent issues" of Jewish settlements, Jerusalem, and the return of refugees, which were excluded from the 1993 agreement. The outbreak of the *Al Aqsa Intifada* (or "Second Intifada") is generally understood as the result of the Palestinians' frustration at the failure of the Accords to achieve its promised goals and a reaction to the enormous growth of Jewish-only settlements throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

In part 2, we undertake a consideration of Christianity's post-WWII project to atone for anti-Semitism. Chapters 5 and 6 are a review of the effort by Christians to reverse the theology complicit in two millennia of Western anti-Semitism. We'll pay particular attention to the implications of this project for Christian attitudes toward modern political Zionism. In chapters 7 and 8, we explore the thinking of a number of contemporary progressive Christian theologians regarding the Holy Land and the Jewish people. We'll see that even in those thinkers who have been passionately devoted to universalism, equality, and social justice, we can detect a reluctance to deny the Jewish people a superior right to the land.

In part 3, I propose that a return to the model of community that characterized early Christianity can provide the key to achieving peace in the Holy Land today. Chapter 9 opens with a consideration of several Jewish progressive writers. We'll see that even as they struggle with the ethical and theological issues raised by political Zionism, their thinking reveals a persistent sense of entitlement with respect to the Jewish claim to the land. Chapter 10 considers the voices of social critics within Israel and frames this discussion through a consideration of contemporary work on nonviolence. Chapters 11 and 12 continue the discussion of alternatives to violence as a solution to the conflict in the Holy Land. We will explore the work of contemporary scholars who see the Gospels as the record of a movement of social transformation.

Finally, in chapter 13, we consider the key role of the faith communities, in particular the American church, in the mounting of a broad, grassroots movement to guide the political change needed to bring peace. This chapter includes a prescription for action and a vision for a new interfaith agenda based on a commitment to universal justice.