

## **There's More Than One Way To Tell Any Story**

**By Robert Rabinowitz**

The obscenities of the recent violence between Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs sent me searching through my files and notes in a mood of anxious nostalgia. During the summer after I graduated from university, in the midst of trying to work out what to do next and what sort of Jew I wanted to be, I went to Israel and began informal research on the very issue on which the peace process recently foundered -- Jerusalem. This was perhaps due to the friendship I had struck up at university with a Palestinian journalist who had taken a year out to study in the UK.

On a previous visit to Israel with some college friends, he had arranged for us to spend a day touring the West Bank; meeting with young Palestinian men our age, a future member of the Madrid negotiating team and the head of a refugee camp; and visiting a house recently raided by Israeli security forces. The trip had a profound effect on my political views, giving me an insight into the complexities and ongoing human cost of the conflict.

I turned up in Jerusalem with no formal standing, no sponsoring institution or clear assignment, and just started phoning people and asking to spend time with them. Over the course of a couple of months, I met with Israeli politicians from the left and right, and conducted research at Hebrew University, at B'Tselem (the Israeli human rights organization) and in Palestinian information centers in East Jerusalem and Ramallah. I stayed with Gush Emunim settlers on the hilltop overlooking the refugee camp I had previously visited, and I met with various Palestinian intellectuals. I also uncovered my own family's direct stake in the conflict. My great uncle had been a prominent leader of the Temple Mount Faithful, the group with whom Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount. And I bumped into an elderly cousin - a leader in Rabbinic Human Rights Watch - at a peace service in Jerusalem's Roman Catholic Cathedral. Despite their radically opposing views, they were both Orthodox rabbis. The whole experience was thoroughly bewildering and not a little disheartening.

I remember, one evening, sitting in a daze outside a pizza store on Jerusalem's Ben Yehuda Street. I had spent the morning with a Palestinian advocacy group where the anger and hatred directed at the State of Israel were palpable. In the afternoon, I had first met with a Meretz politician and then spent some time shmoozing with my friend who was a senior official in the local Likud organization. The experience of shuttling back and forth between people who were so firm in their utterly divergent views of the conflict left me feeling that I had no firm footing, that I could not discern what was true and what was real. Fortunately, a friend turned up, shared dinner, and helped bring me back to some sense of normality.

So when the recent crisis erupted, my thoughts naturally went back to that summer and I looked up the notes I had taken at the time. At the top of a sheet titled Important Points, Uncomfortable Questions I had written, probably that same evening:

"There are no facts about Jerusalem. It is impossible to find two people with exactly the same opinion as to how the facts are and what facts are important."

This sentence best sums up what I really learned that summer -- that there is no neutral way to describe a conflict so freighted with anger, fear, hatred, suspicion and claims of injustice. Just the other day, a friend called up. His mother in Israel had complained to him that the BBC or CNN had been calling Gilo "a settlement" rather than referring to it as "a neighborhood" of Jerusalem. He asked me, "So what is it, a neighborhood or a settlement?" I explained to him that it was an area that was thoroughly integrated into the municipality of Jerusalem which Israel regarded as its sovereign territory, but that it was over the Green Line that demarcates the borders of pre-1967 Israel. I asked my friend, "So you tell me, is it a neighborhood or a settlement?" For him it was a neighborhood, for the Palestinians it is a settlement. To deny those titles, to try to shift to neutral language, is to miss the point. The all-consuming feelings and meanings that have congealed from the swirl of intense emotions aroused by the conflict and have attached themselves to those labels are at the conflict's very heart.

Among the hardest things for me to accept that summer were Palestinian views about the Temple Mount. Many, if not most, of the Palestinians with whom I talked believed that Israeli archeological digs were designed to undermine the mosques on the Mount which would then be replaced with a Jewish place of worship. While I found this idea frankly laughable, it was all too real for Palestinians and they could cite evidence of dastardly Israeli activities to support their claims. To ignore or minimize this belief would be to write out of the conflict the reality in which one party to it was living. In my notes, I wrote about the great discomfort caused by encountering such profoundly different views of reality:

"A woman at PHRIC (Palestine Human Rights Information Center) told me today that Jerusalem had apartheid. Her poster said, 'Evil states pass, just states remain.' I traveled to East Jerusalem today, not exactly heroic, but few enough do it. I sat and looked at the ivory towers of Mt. Scopus. I seemed to make the people at PASSIA (a Palestinian academic group) nervous; Jeff from PHRIC stared at my kippah as I took it

out of my bag. They're all working on conflict resolution, but not with each other. Chaya (an Israeli peace activist) has never "made it" to PASSIA. My honorable Western friends [working for PHRIC and PASSIA], who have no reason to be scared of West Jerusalem, have never been. It is a mutual apartheid. They do not want to know. Perhaps it is easier to resolve conflicts on your own.... I think it is a mutual apartheid of emotion. The positions separating leftist Jew and moderate Palestinian are not so far apart, but they are weighed down with emotion. Paper proposals can never express it, but the eyes, the twist of the mouth can."

I do not think that there is any specific political lesson I would wish to apply from my experiences then to the current tragic events. I do, however, believe that there is a moral imperative never to back away from the discomfort caused by engaging with the profoundly different world-views of others, even those of your enemy. It is important to emphasize that understanding the views of others does not entail condoning or excusing them. As Hillel put it: "Do not judge your fellow until you have stood in that person's shoes." Hillel does not mean to tell us not to make judgments, however harsh and unpleasant. His point, it seems to me, is that making such judgments without trying to understand the profoundly different world-views of others demeans their dignity as human beings and, in so doing, demeans our own.