

Series on Post disengagement issue

5) A visit to Auschwitz Birkanau

While being in Krakow last week, I told my hosts of Villa Dicus that I want them to arrange for me to visit the Auschwitz Birkanau memorial established in 1947 at the site of the largest Nazi death camp, where 1,1 million people at least were murdered by the Nazis, 90% of them are Jews. The killing of the Jews took place also on other concentration camps in Poland such as Treblinka, leading altogether to the murder of millions of Jews.

My request to go to Auschwitz was because I believe that there are root psychological causes that have made all attempts to solve our Israeli Palestinian conflict fail so far. Look at what happened to the Oslo Declaration of Principals, at why hope was overridden by fear between the two people during that process*. Why all the dates of implementation of what was agreed upon were not sacred. Why the tension between the two peoples arose while the peace talks were taking place between the political elites from both sides?

A letter that I received from an Israeli friend today after I told him that I visited Auschwitz included the answer to my questions above. He wrote: "Walid: I am eager to learn about your insights following Auschwitz. Cheli's (my wife) parents met their terrible death there, while she was saved in dramatic fashion as a baby by a Polish family and converted to Catholicism"! You see: She lost her parents in one hand, but in the other hand she saved herself only by converting to Catholicism. In this regard my Polish guide told me while in Auschwitz that out of millions of Jews that were living in Poland before the Holocaust, only 10,000 from the survivors are declaring themselves to be Jews now, many were obliged to be converted to Catholicism as a way of survival. He told me also about the death-bed confessions of old "Catholics" to their sons and daughters about their previous Judaism, and the effects of shock of these confessions on the sons and daughters, some of whom were now Catholic believers, making it very difficult for them to move to Judaism again!

Auschwitz: In the entrance the sign says: "work makes you free", which gave you directly the sense of a type of camp where people were working hard without good food, and when they became disabled they were killed. Moreover it was very shocking to discover that there were German companies who were taking the hairs of the people killed in order to produce clothes from them, and other companies who were taking the ashes of the burned bodies in order to produce fertilizers!

The people were put in five gas chambers in both Auschwitz and Birkenau, killing 6 thousand people every day, then after the killing the gold teeth and earnings would be taken, (while the clothes were taken before the killing). Then the bodies would be given to the company of fertilizers, or thrown in the close rivers of SOEA and Stara Wisew.

* Daniel Bar- Tal

It was very shocking to see through the glass a full room of women hairs that were cut, and other rooms of the belonging of whom were killed included the children, who were given priority to be killed in order to get to what the German Nazis called "the final solution of the Jewish problem".

What lessons to learn from this for our post disengagement plans between the Israelis and the Palestinians?

It should be said first that every Palestinian should visit Auschwitz/Birkenau in order to get a real human sense of what happened. Despite the existence of a small minority of Palestinian and Arabs who deny the Holocaust or marginalize it, the majority of the Palestinians and Arabs condemn it. But this is not enough: If we want to solve the Israeli Palestinian conflict we should move another step forward and say loudly and clearly: we acknowledge the Jewish people pains, and we are in solidarity with you regarding these pains. We might come to say we are not responsible for the Holocaust, which is true. But it is also true that we are living with the people who suffered from the Holocaust and have it in their collective memory. Therefore we are in a situation that directly influences us, and in a sense makes us the therapists of our occupier!

At the same time, although the 1948 Nakba, and 1967 Naksa, are not equal either in quality and quantity to the Holocaust, it is still the responsibility of the Israelis to acknowledge the pains of the Palestinians, and to take responsibility with the Palestinians in how to find a solution to the problem of the "victims of the victims".

How to do that? How to move along the process of acknowledgment? And therefore the process of healing?

It looks like that we the Palestinians should begin and should take the first step of acknowledgment. Although this might look unfair in the eyes of some people, but I will say why we should be the initiators: The point of departure is ethical. We should take the initiative because it is ethical to show support towards human suffering.

The second reason comes from the dynamics of the Israeli Palestinian relations: Dynamics that are built on fearful/ angry discourse, where the anger of the Palestinians will be but will makes them more frightened of the anger*.

This fearful/angry discourse is connected deeply with two collective memories, that of the fearful minority (the Jews), also that of powerful Arabic/Islamic "great nation" of which the Palestinians feel they are a part.

Therefore recognizing the Israeli deep fears coming from the Holocaust and the weak position they feel, will be a step forward which will make the Israeli position become smoother, relaxed and ready to recognize and acknowledge the Palestine suffering.

* Thank to Omar Yousef for this idea.

This visit to Auschwitz/ Birkenau concentration camps led me to deepen my previous conviction that if we did not solve the problem of Jewish fears in Israel/Palestine, we will not be able to relax their position on Palestinian rights. Therefore what will work for future cooperation between the two peoples in this land will not be the use of Palestinian force against the stronger Israeli force. We must address the Israeli fears, acknowledge those fears, and based on that understanding of the situation that all kinds of violence against Israel, while practicing non-violence in the same time together with the Israelis in order to change the map from conflict to peace.

In this direction it might be worthy to organize systematic Israeli-Palestinian joint visits to Auschwitz, where these joint visits will help the Palestinians understand that the "other" is their equal in suffering, and also it will help Israelis understand that their Palestinian "enemies" are with them in understanding the suffering that Jews endured. This joint experience will help both sides to get strongly together as human beings.

One of my Polish companions said "the Israelis are coming here with body guards. What do they want? Do they want to save themselves from us? We are ready to protect them because we also paid the price where two million Polish also were killed by the Nazis".

I answered "This is also an additional reason why I want the Palestinians and Israelis to come together to Auschwitz. The Israelis coming alone will make them feel isolated and that Anti Semitism is all around them. While when they come with Palestinians, they will get a feeling of solidarity and acting together against anti-Semitism".

My Polish companion said: "this proposal look very nice, but also you should tell your Israeli colleagues not to continue hating us, we the Polish did not kill the Jews, the Nazis did that, also we fought with the Jews against the Nazis and paid heavy price"* [that is right that there were Polish anti-Semitism that got in the way of cooperation in the uprising against the Nazis in Warsaw and elsewhere in Poland, but this was practical by a minority](#)".

I told him "sometimes the victim might hate other victims, this is our case in Israel/Palestine, and it look like the case of Israelis with you, but we should overcome this problems together".

In other hand the visits the "Zakhrout" organize for Israelis and Palestinians inside Israel should also be encouraged and extended.

To finish with this: we need a deep therapy for our conflict through civil society activities as described, but it is also the responsibility of the political leadership to find types of triggering) critical events*that solve in one minute problems of 100 years. The question is who will take the initiative?

* Thanks to Dan Jacobson for this term.