

Dear Salman

Uri Avnery

May 17, 2014

YEARS AGO I was invited to a UN conference on the Palestinian refugees in Paris. I was to open the debate as an Israeli, after the Palestinian representative, Salman Abu Sitta, a refugee from a Bedouin tribe in the Negev, had opened as a Palestinian.

Before the debate I was warned that Abu Sitta was the most extreme of the refugees, a notorious hater of Israel. When my turn came, I said that I had to choose between answering him or reading my prepared text. I decided to read my text and promised to invite him to a private dinner and discuss his points.

When I finished, Abu Sitta reminded me of that promise. We had dinner in a quiet Paris restaurant and I found Abu Sitta a very engaging person. Rachel, my wife, was deeply moved by his account of his flight as a boy during the Naqba, and so was I.

Abu Sitta, by now a very wealthy international contractor, has devoted his life to the plight of the Palestinian refugees and is, perhaps, the world's foremost expert on the Naqba.

This week I received from him a letter, which I feel the need to copy here verbatim:

DEAR URI,

I read with great interest your interview in Haaretz about your rich and eventful life. You stuck to your principles since the early fifties when you found that the old doctrine was neither workable or moral.

I remember vividly our chat over dinner in Paris with your kind wife Rachel, bless her soul.

You described your early days as a young German by the name of Helmut, when you joined the terrorist organization, the Irgun, and when you, carrying a machine gun on a hilltop at Hulayqat (where now there is a war memorial to honor those soldiers) watched the sea of humanity of expelled refugees march towards Gaza by the sea shore.

I also told you my story; how I became a refugee without ever seeing a Jew in my life and how I spent years to find out who did it by name, face and battalion.

I remember asking you "*would you agree to my return to my house if it is next to you?*" You said emphatically NO.

I wrote all this in my memoirs to be published this year in Europe and USA.

I am reminded of a similar story but with a different ending. I refer to Reflections of a Daughter of the '48 Generation by Dr. Tikva Honig-Parnass. It is a moving account of how truth and reality faced her, as a Palmach soldier, with the grave injustice done to Palestinians. Since then she spends her energy to defend their rights, including the Right of Return.

I saw no trace or hint of retraction in your interview or what I have hoped, namely your recognition of the Right of Return, or the atonement and remedy of the greatest sin: the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

Would it not be a fitting last station of a long life (and I wish

you more of it) for you to stand at hilltops (again) and shout for all to hear, summing up all your life experiences, saying: the refugees must return, we must repent the sin of ethnic cleansing?

Is this too much to ask for a principled man like you to do this? I am not asking this on behalf of the Palestinians, because no doubt they WILL return. I am hoping that it would be a crown to your life achievements in the Israeli milieu.

As I wrote repeatedly: The history of the Jews will not be marked any more by the alleged killing of Christ nor by the Nazi atrocities in WWII, but will be indelibly marked by what they have done to Palestinians, deliberately and constantly, without remorse, regret or remedy, thus reflecting that side of the human spirit which does not learn from history and that which empties itself of its own moral posture.

Best regards, Salman Abu Sitta.

DEAR SALMAN,

I was profoundly moved by this letter. It took me days to find the courage to answer. I try to do so as sincerely as possible.

I also vividly remember our conversation in Paris, and wrote about it in the second part of my memoirs, which will appear in the course of this year. It may be interesting for the readers to compare our two descriptions of the same conversation. About the scene near Hulayqat I have written in the first part, which has already appeared in Hebrew.

When I was wounded in the 1948 war, I decided that it would be my life's mission to work for peace between our two peoples. I hope that I have been true to that promise.

Making peace after such a long and bitter conflict is both a moral and a political endeavor. There is often a contradiction between the two aspects.

I respect the few people in Israel who, like Tikva, completely devote themselves to the moral side of the refugees' tragedy, whatever the consequence for the chances of peace. My own moral outlook tells me that peace must be the first aim, before and above everything else.

The war of 1948 was a terrible human tragedy. Both sides believed that it was an existential battle, that their very life was hanging in the balance. It is often forgotten that ethnic cleansing (not a familiar expression in those days) was practiced by both sides. Our side occupied large territories, creating a huge refugee problem, while the Palestinian side succeeded in occupying only small Jewish areas, like the Old City of Jerusalem and the Etzion settlement bloc south of Bethlehem. But not a single Jew remained there.

The war, like the later Bosnian war, was an ethnic war, in which both sides tried to conquer as large a part of the country as possible – EMPTY of the other population.

As an eyewitness and participant, I can testify to the fact that the origins of the refugee problem are extremely complex. During the first seven months of the war, the attacks on the Arab

villages were an absolute military necessity. At that time, we were the weaker side. After a number of very cruel battles, the wheel turned and I believe that a deliberate policy of expulsion was adopted by the Zionist leadership.

But the real question is: Why were the 750,000 refugees not allowed home after the end of the hostilities?

ONE HAS to remember the situation. It was three years after the smokestacks of Auschwitz and the other camps had gone cold. Hundreds of thousands of wretched survivors crowded the refugee camps in Europe and had nowhere to go but to the new Israel. They were brought here and hastily put into the homes of the Palestinian refugees.

All this did not obliterate our moral obligation to put an end to the terrible tragedy of the Palestinian refugees. In 1953 I published in my magazine, "Haolam Hazeh", a detailed plan for the solution of the refugee problem. It included (a) an apology to the refugees and the acknowledgment in principle of the right to return, (b) the return and resettlement of a substantial number, (c) generous compensation to all the rest. Since the Israeli government refused to consider the possibility of the return of a single individual, the plan was not even discussed.

WHY DO I not stand on a hilltop and cry out for the return of all the refugees?

Peace is made between consenting parties. There is absolutely no chance that the vast majority of Israelis would freely agree to the return of all the refugees and their descendents, who amount to six or seven million people—the same number as Israel's Jewish citizens. This would be the end of the "Jewish state" and the beginning of a "bi-national state", to which 99% of Israelis strenuously object. It can be imposed only by a crushing military defeat, which is currently impossible because of Israel's infinite military superiority, including nuclear arms.

I can stand on the hilltops and shout—but it would not bring peace (and a solution) one step closer.

To my mind, waiting for a solution in a hundred years, while the conflict and the misery continue, is not really moral.

DEAR SALMAN, I have listened attentively to your presentation.

You say that Israel could easily absorb all the refugees by putting them into the Negev, which is almost empty. That is quite true.

The vast majority of Israelis would reject that, because they are fiercely resolved to have a large Jewish majority in Israel. But I also ask myself: What is the logic of that?

When I met with Yasser Arafat in Beirut during the war of 1982, I also visited several Palestinian refugee camps. I asked many refugees whether they wanted to return to Israel. Most said that they wanted to return to their villages (which were eradicated long ago) but not anywhere else in Israel.

What is the sense of putting them into the harsh conditions of the desert in a Zionist dominated and Hebrew speaking country, far from their original homes? Would they want that?

Arafat and his successors limit their aim to a "just and AGREED solution", giving the Israeli government a veto right. That means, in practice, at most the return of a symbolic number.

My latest proposal is for the Israeli president to apologize and express the profound regret of the Israeli people for its part in the creation and prolongation of the tragedy.

The Israeli government must recognize the moral right of the refugees to return.

Israel should organize the return of 50,000 refugees every year for ten years. (I am almost alone in Israel in demanding this number. Most peace groups would reduce that to 100,000 altogether.)

All the other refugees should receive compensation on the lines of the compensation paid by Germany to the Jewish victims. (No comparison, of course.)

With the foundation of the State of Palestine, they would receive Palestinian passports and be able to settle there, in their country.

In the not too distant future, when the two states, Israel and Palestine, shall be finally living side by side, with open borders and with their capitals in Jerusalem, perhaps within a region-wide framework, the problem will lose its sting.

IT HURTS me to write this letter. For me, the refugees are not abstract "problem", but human beings with human faces. But I will not lie to you.

I would be honored to live next to you (even in the Negev desert)

Salamaat,
uri.