

Neutral—in whose favor?

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A FORMER ISRAELI army Chief of Staff, a man of limited intelligence, was told that a certain individual was an atheist. “Yes,” he asked, “*but a Jewish atheist or a Christian atheist?*”

Lenin, in his Swiss exile, once inquired about the party affiliation of a newly elected member of the Duma. “*Oh, he is just a fool!*” his assistant asserted. Lenin answered impatiently: “*A fool in favor of whom?*”

I am tempted to pose a similar question about people touted to be neutral in our conflict: “*Neutral in favor of whom?*”

THE QUESTION came to my mind when I saw an Israeli documentary about the US intermediaries who have tried over the last 40 years or so to broker peace between the Palestinians and us.

For some reason, most of them were Jews.

I am sure that all of them were loyal American citizens, who would have been sincerely offended by any suggestion that they served a foreign country, such as Israel. They honestly felt themselves to be neutral in our conflict.

But were they neutral? Are they? Can they be?

My answer is: No, they couldn't.

Not because they were dishonest. Not because they consciously served one side. Certainly not. Perish the thought!

But for a much deeper reason. They were brought up on the narrative of one side. From childhood on, they have internalized the history and the terminology of one side (ours). They couldn't even imagine that the other side has a different narrative, with a different terminology.

This does not prevent them from being neutral. Neutral for one side.

By the way, in this respect there is no great difference between American Jews and other Americans. They have generally been brought up on the same history and ideology, based on the Hebrew Bible.

LET US take the latest example. John Kerry is carrying with him a draft plan for the solution of the conflict.

It was prepared meticulously by a staff of experts. And what a staff! One hundred and sixty dedicated individuals!

I won't ask how many of them are fellow Jews. The very question smacks of anti-Semitism. Jewish Americans are like any other Americans. Loyal to their country.

Neutral in our conflict.

Neutral for whom?

Well, let's look at the plan. Among many other provisions, it foresees the stationing of Israeli troops in the Palestinian Jordan valley. A temporary measure. Only for ten years. After that, Israel will decide whether its security needs have been met. If the answer is negative, the troops will remain for as long as necessary—by Israeli judgment.

For neutral Americans, this sounds quite reasonable. There will be a free and sovereign Palestinian state. The Jordan valley will be part of this state.

If the Palestinians achieve their long-longed-for independence, why should they care about such a bagatelle? If they are not considering military action against Israel, why would they mind?

Logical if you are an Israeli. Or an American. Not if you are a Palestinian.

Because for a Palestinian, the Jordan valley constitutes 20% of their putative state, which altogether consists of 22% of the territory they consider their historical homeland. And because they believe, based on experience, that there is very little chance that Israelis will ever willingly withdraw from a piece of land if they can help it. And because the continued military control of the valley would allow the Israelis to cut the State of Palestine off from any contact with the Arab world, indeed from the world at large.

And, well, there is such a thing as national pride and sovereignty.

Imagine Mexican—or even Canadian—troops stationed on 20% of the territory of the USA. Or French troops in control of 20% of Germany. Or Russian troops in 20% of Poland. Or Serbian troops in Kosovo?

Impossible, you say. So why do American experts take it for granted that Palestinians are different? That they wouldn't mind?

Because they have a certain conception of Israelis and Palestinians.

THE SAME lack of understanding of the other side is, of course, prevalent in the relations between the two sides themselves.

On the last day of anno 2013, Israel had to release 26 Palestinian prisoners, who had been held since before

the 1993 Oslo Accord. This was part of the preliminary agreement achieved by John Kerry for starting the current negotiations.

Every time this happens, there is an outcry in Israel and rejoicing in Palestine. Nothing exemplifies the mental gap between the two peoples more clearly than these contrasting reactions.

For Israelis, these prisoners are vile murderers, despicable terrorists with “blood on their hands”. For Palestinians, they are national heroes, soldiers of the sacred Palestinian cause, who have sacrificed more than 20 years of their young lives for the freedom of their people.

For days, all Israeli networks have reported several times a day on demonstrations of bereaved Israeli mothers, clutching in their hands large photos of their sons and daughters, crying out in anguish against the release of their murderers. And immediately after, scenes in Ramallah and Nablus of the mothers of the prisoners, clutching the portraits of their loved ones, dancing and singing in anticipation of their arrival.

Many Israelis were cringing at this sight. But the editors and anchormen would be astonished if they were told that they were inciting the people against the prisoner release, and—indirectly—against the peace negotiations. Why? How? Just honest reporting!

This revulsion at the other side’s rejoicing seems to be an ancient reaction. The Bible tells us that after King Saul was killed in the war against the Philistines, King David lamented: “TELL IT NOT IN GATH, PUBLISH IT NOT IN THE STREETS OF ASKELON (BOTH PHILISTINE TOWNS); LEST THE DAUGHTERS OF THE PHILISTINES REJOICE, LEST THE DAUGHTERS OF THE UNCIRCUMCISED TRIUMPH.” (II Samuel. 1:20)

Binyamin Netanyahu went further. He made a speech denouncing the Palestinian leadership. How could they organize these demonstrations of joy? What does that say about the sincerity of Mahmoud Abbas? How could they rejoice at the sight of these abominable murderers, who had slaughtered innocent Jews? Doesn’t this prove that they are not serious about seeking peace, that they are all unreformed terrorists at heart, out for Jewish blood? So we cannot give up any security measures for a long, long time.

The prisoners themselves, when interviewed by Israeli TV immediately after their release, argued in excellent Hebrew (learned in prison) that the main thing was to achieve peace. When asked, one of them said: “*Is there a single Israeli, from Netanyahu down, who hasn’t killed Arabs?*”

THIS GAP of perceptions is, to my mind, the largest obstacle to peace.

This week Netanyahu gave us another beautiful example. He spoke about the continued incitement against Israel in Palestinian schoolbooks. This item of right-wing Israeli

propaganda pops up every time the other tired arguments are let out to grass.

How can there be peace, Netanyahu exclaimed, if Palestinian children learn in their classes that Haifa and Nazareth are part of Palestine? This means that they are educated to destroy Israel!

This is so impertinent, that one can only gasp. I don’t think that there exists a single Hebrew schoolbook that does not mention the fact that Jericho and Hebron are part of Eretz Israel. To change this one would have to abolish the Bible.

Haifa and Hebron, Jericho and Nazareth are all part of the same country, called Palestine in Arabic and Eretz Israel in Hebrew. They are all deeply rooted in the consciousness of both peoples. A compromise between them does not mean that they give up their historical memories, but that they agree to partition the country into two political entities.

Netanyahu and his ilk cannot imagine this, and therefore they are unable to make peace. On the Palestinian side there are certainly many people who also find this impossible, or too painful.

I wonder if Irish schoolbooks have obliterated 400 years of English domination or abomination. I doubt it. I also wonder how English schoolbooks treat this chapter of their history.

In any case, if an independent (neutral?) commission of experts were to examine all the schoolbooks in Israel and Palestine, they would find very little difference between them. Of Israel’s four main school systems (national, national-religious, western-orthodox and eastern-orthodox), at least the three religious ones are so nationalist-racist that a Palestinian competitor would be hard-pressed to trump them. None of them says anything about the existence of a Palestinian people, not to mention any rights on the country they may possess. God forbid (literally)!

TO BE more than a mere fragile armistice, peace needs reconciliation. See: Mandela.

Reconciliation is impossible if either side is totally oblivious to the narrative of the other, their history, beliefs, perceptions, myths.

John Kerry does not need 160 or 1600 experts, neutral or otherwise. He needs one good psychologist. Or maybe two.

One can easily understand the feelings of a mother whose son was killed by a Palestinian militant. If one tries, one can also understand the feelings of a mother whose son was ordered by his leaders to attack Israelis and who returns from prison after 30 years.

Only if the American intermediaries, neutral or otherwise, understand both can they contribute to furthering peace.