

Across the chasm: Voices of reason

A model dialogue for Arabs and Jews

They are voices in the wilderness. But a handful of Israelis and Palestinians are talking to one another. *U.S. News* recently brought two of the most articulate together in Jerusalem: Israeli David Hartman, 56, American-born director of Jerusalem's Shalom Hartman Institute for Jewish study, and Palestinian Sari Nusseibeh, 39, professor of Islamic philosophy at Bir Zeit University on the West Bank. Nusseibeh has already found that dialogue has its dangers: Last year, he had his arm broken by a gang of masked Palestinians after he talked with Moshe Amirav, a maverick member of the Likud bloc; Amirav was later drummed out of the Likud.

Nusseibeh: What is happening in the West Bank and Gaza could be translated into something constructive for both sides. But there's also a dynamic of deterioration, of racial and civil confrontation that may lead to real war. The problem is that while the chances of the situation's getting better are better, so are the chances for its getting worse. The only certainty is that things won't return to what they were four months ago.

Hartman: I agree. And I think that both alternatives exist in Israel: A push for even greater control over the territories and a realization that we can't rule a people against its will. That said, I think that the solution fundamentally depends on you, the Palestinians. It's a simple question: Are you ready to accept our permanent presence—our right to be here—or not?

Nusseibeh: That's wrong. It's Israel that has to make the choice: Either continued hegemony over the people in the occupied territories and the South Africanization of this country or an equitable peace. I'm depressed because, given Israeli politics, I don't see how things can possibly get better. As far as I can tell, the Palestinians are now ready for peace negotiations—and by "Palestinians," of course, I mean the Palestine Liberation Organization. But I'm not convinced the Israeli government wants to negotiate a resolution to this conflict. If it were serious, it would test it all by challenging the PLO—by saying: "O.K., you want to negotiate. Come on!"

I also don't think it's necessarily correct to ask the Palestinians to accept preconditions for negotiation. Don't misunderstand me: Personally, I don't mind a renunciation of terror, just as I would like to see Israel renounce violence as a precondition. But I think that it's really only in the negotiating room that we can come to an agreement that involves mutual recognition, security for Israel and sovereignty for the Palestinians—with peace for both sides. If we Palestinians don't accept that in negotiations, then Israel can say to everybody, "Look, the PLO hasn't delivered."

Hartman: This is a standard disagreement between us. I

don't think you appreciate the profound effect that Palestinians have on the Israeli soul. It may seem that we call the shots and define the power moves. But the real problem here is an Israeli sense that the Palestinians have yet to come to terms with our permanency, that you still fail to see our reality as organic to this country, that you don't understand that every time I put a shovel in the ground here, my *zayde* [grandfather] comes out, that I believe that this country represents not only my past and my present but my future. When you speak of a Palestinian state, what you're really talking about is not just the West Bank and Gaza but the heartland of Israel.

Mideast politics are defined by memories. For Israelis, Yassir Arafat is the incarnation of the Amalekites, who sought the destruction of the Jewish people. This is the metaphor and ultimately the label. So when you insist on Israel's negotiating with the PLO, I think it's a nonstarter. I would rather do it in another way. Instead of talking about "with whom?" let's set the conditions for the "whom" we talk to: (a) That they seek national Palestinian sovereignty without military power and (b) that in no way do they claim Israel is a passing episode with no real right to be here. If you choose otherwise—if you choose military power—that means you've chosen permanent war with Israel, and we will have to respond with all our power.

Nusseibeh: Palestinians view their roots in this land with at least as much spiritual passion as you view yours.

As for practical negotiations, anything that tries to get off the ground without the PLO is a nonstarter. Let's also distinguish between addressing Israeli public opinion, which is a legitimate exercise that Palestinians haven't tried, and addressing Israeli officials through secret diplomacy, which the PLO has tried.

Also, I'm not going to tell you that the Palestinians in the refugee camps or even the Palestinians in general don't want Haifa and Jaffa. Maybe they do, deep down. But the question is whether they are

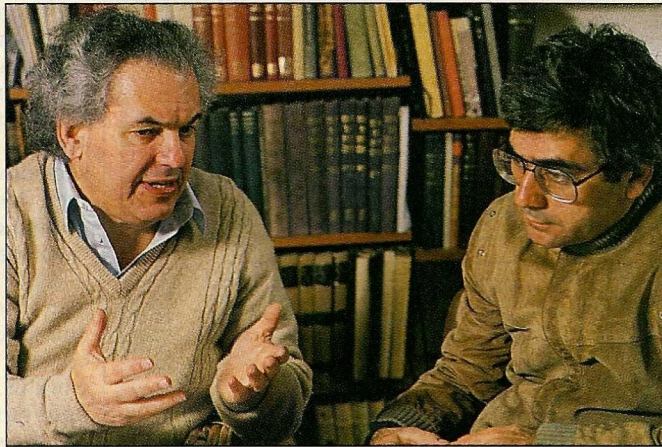
ready to give up that dream in return for something smaller. I believe that this readiness exists in the Palestinian community. It didn't 15 years ago, but it does today.

Hartman: If Yassir Arafat says, "That's what I believe," then I personally have no problem with him. But, some way, we have to correct the terrible sense that if Israel negotiates with these people, it causes its own destruction.

Nusseibeh: Look, I can apply the same arguments. I can tell you we cannot sit down with Shamir, Sharon, Rabin or any member of the Israeli government, because of their association in the Palestinian mind with injustice and terror.

If we can negotiate with the Israelis despite how we view them and their past, then why can't you negotiate with the PLO? And if they sit down together, would that not constitute recognizing each other's right to exist in its own state? My answer is that this can be the basis for negotiations. But the negotiations have to be held not about principles but about millions of details: How to construct the future framework of coexistence in the economy, in tourism, water, open borders.

Hartman: The crucial question is: Who can deliver, and how can we begin the process in a fruitful way? I'm saying there is mutual hatred here that is not unredeemable. I'm saying the hatred is born from mythological images of the other and that



Philosophers: Hartman, left, and Nusseibeh tackle big issues

we can break them. If you had asked me two weeks before Anwar Sadat came here in 1978 whether people in Israel hate Sadat, I would have answered "Yes." But as soon as he arrived here and there was a sense of his acknowledging our presence, everyone in Israel opened their hearts to him. There was an unbelievable atmosphere in Jerusalem. That tells me there was no deep ideological ground for the hatred; it can be corrected. The anger, terror and suspicion are not an unchangeable psychic national hatred. Sometimes in a marriage, people throw dishes at one another and call each other names, and you think, "What's going on here?" Then you realize the trouble is because one came home from work and the other didn't ask, "Did you have a hard day?" And suddenly what looked like elemental rage turns out to be something that could be alleviated. I believe the terror can be alleviated.

Nusseibeh: You Israelis keep mentioning the word *terror*. But let's be fair. Terror is practiced by two sides. And right now, the predominant terror is practiced by Israel against Palestinians. It's *our* villages where people are being harassed, tortured, killed.

Do Palestinians practice what you call "terror" as part of their natural behavior, or is it a reaction to dispossession, to the denial of national dignity, to 40 years of diaspora and refugee life? I believe that if we address the cause, if we satisfy our national aspirations in the context of a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, then the chances for violence will greatly diminish. People's national energies will then be directed not against Israel but toward constructing the future Palestinian state.

Hartman: That's only a partial explanation. Palestinian terror against Jews predates Israel, and your diaspora came precisely because you constantly sought my destruction. So admit the mistake of believing we would disappear!

That said, I appreciate the pain you feel when Israel is always portrayed as the victim and the Palestinians as the terrorists. We keep on talking about each other's deepest humiliations and fears—and we're not moving. That's the deepest problem. We're stuck in our mutual image as victims. And then Jews come with this great elemental memory of their own sense as a suffering people. It's not paranoiac, and that's the amazing phenomenon—that even though we have such a powerful Army, we still see ourselves as victims.

You have to hear that, Sari, and listen, because it's not just a loincloth covering up a desire for aggression. There is a very deep sense within the communal psyche that we are victims. It may seem a funny notion—a "victim" with the most powerful Air Force. But, believe me, that combination is very dangerous—because when you are a victim and you have an F-15, then you are impregnable, because there is no moral criticism of your power because you are a victim—and sometimes you don't see what you are doing because you are a victim. When a victim has power, then it is a very, very dangerous combination. But you have to hear the fact that there is a very deep, elemental feeling of uncertainty, a feeling of terror. "They" want us in the sea: It's the old pogrom all over again.

Remember, Israel wasn't created by people who came out of Princeton or Yale and 300 years of American experience; it

was created by people who came out of Eastern European and Islamic ghettos, by people with deep bruises on their psyches. When you suddenly talk about formal principles, about accepting U.N. Resolution 242 or 338 after 40 years of talking about destroying us and of rejecting peace, I feel you've missed our real fear of becoming homeless again. Our concerns are born from an appreciation of our history and our vulnerability. Address them! Talk to us the way we perceive ourselves, not as the powerful aggressor you see us as. What I'm saying is that you have to help us. The national psyche of the Jewish soul can't be healed by a Jewish psychiatrist; it needs a Palestinian analyst. So help me heal the traumas.

Israelis have to start off by saying there is a Palestinian nation: You are a nation—not individuals, not wild terrorists. Those who express their pain in the West Bank today express a national will for self-determination. I'm not going to define who should represent you; you should do it. If you want to confederate with Jordan, without Jordan—that's your decision. But address my fears—not with U.N. resolutions but by saying that you accept total demilitarization, that we'll have open borders and that you don't want to see a Jew suffer, just as I don't want to see Palestinians suffering. This doesn't mean there won't be madmen in the Palestinian community who seek all of Israel and want my destruction, just as there are those in Israel who seek the "greater Israel" and the dispossession of Palestinians. We'll control our madmen—as you must control yours.

Nusseibeh: The only true security border Israel can have is the one drawn in Palestinian hearts. If we achieve our minimal requirement—to live as a nation with dignity—then Israel needn't worry about its security. And, remember, *my* fears also have to be alleviated. As for madmen, I cannot control them.

Hartman: So if you need help, we'll work together on it. It seems so simple to me.

Nusseibeh: If it's so simple, why doesn't your government come out with it? You don't want to see any Palestinians suffering; I don't want to see Jews suffering. You recognize me as a nation; I recognize you as a nation. So why is there no peace? Because your government doesn't share your opinions, whereas, in my case, I'm confident that the PLO, if challenged, shares my opinion.

Hartman: I think there's more of a gap between yourself and the PLO than you admit, and less than you imagine between my position and that of significant leadership in the Israeli government. But, frankly, I don't think either the Israeli government or the PLO is going to solve this. Imagery and rhetoric have paralyzed too many of the leaders on both sides. They're locked in position—afraid that if they move boldly, they lose their constituencies. Something has to take place independent of governments, something that creates a grass-roots framework.

Nusseibeh: It's possible. Instead of moving things from the top, you move things from the bottom. But I still feel my own leadership is ready for negotiation, ready for a two-state solution. The minute the PLO is challenged and refuses to deliver, then it will be a different story to me and to the Palestinian people.

Hartman: For me, our friendship and mutual trust is the way we begin. You build a world by ones. ■



Victims: *Mirror images of terror and hatred on both sides*