

## “My Times” ....Sari Nusseibeh

As a Palestinian who has lived most of his life in Jerusalem, and coming into the world only one year after Israel came into existence, it would have been something of a miracle if ‘my times’ were more informed by anything other than our ‘front-door’ conflict, or characterized by anything like a clarity of direction. My mother, who had gone to stay with her side of the family in Ramleh, and was then forced to leave the country with them and move to Lebanon to avoid the fighting in ‘48, once coyly told me of the circumstance of my conception in Beirut’s hills: my father –fully engaged at the time in Jerusalem’s defense efforts and had accompanied the Palestinian military commander Abdel Qader Husseini to Damascus to solicit military support and equipment from the head of the Arab forces there - interrupted his journey back to Jerusalem to pay her a visit. It was just for the night –memorable for her, and existentially definitive for me. The following morning, he continued his journey to Jerusalem where Abdel Qader had already gone to al-Qastal in the Jerusalem hills, and where Palestinian forces were trying to fend off Israeli advances to Jerusalem from the west. Within two days, Abdel Qader was killed, and al-Qastal fell. The Haganah forces were systematically scoring military victories against the disorganized and limited contingents of Arab armies sent to Palestine, and ensuring where they could to terrorize people from their homes and villages. Within weeks, the UN passed its resolution recognizing the State of Israel, and shortly after that my father was caught in an Israeli ambush in the northern outskirts of Jerusalem, receiving several wounds, and eventually having to have one of his legs amputated. Eight months after that, my mother gave birth to me in some apartment in Damascus, where her family –her mother, brothers and sisters- had found temporary lodgings. (The head of their family, my grandfather, had passed away only a year before, two years after

the British had allowed him to return to Palestine from exile in the Seychelles islands). My father, who later joined the All-Palestine Government which the Palestinian leadership established in defiance of partitioning Palestine, was now installed in Cairo, charged with running the short-lived Government's meagerly-financed office. During his short time there he received a telegram from Damascus congratulating him on the birth of a new son, 'Dostoevsky'! Later, my mother's eldest brother –who later became Kuwait's first Ambassador in Washington, D.C. - would explain to him that they decided to give me that name because I cried a lot, constantly interrupting him as he would read aloud the distinguished author's novels to his younger sisters and brothers. My father telegraphed back: Congratulations for the birth of Sari. 'Sari' was the name of the deceased son of one of the most well-known Christian Palestinian literary figures, poets and educators in Jerusalem at the time, whom my father admired, and whose verses he often recited. He wished to tell them the idea behind 'Dostoevsky' was right; but not the name! It wasn't long after that before my father came back to Jerusalem, now under Jordanian rule, and brought his family, including me, to join him. In Jerusalem, life's 'landscape' for him and my mother had become completely transformed: 'Jordanian' Jerusalem was different from the 'Mandate Jerusalem' they knew before '48. Palestine as a whole had become transformed: now part of it was Jordan; part was attached to Egypt; and the larger part had become the 'Jewish State'. My people, the Palestinians, had also become scattered: hostilities, some of them more life-threatening than others, drove over a three quarter of a million of them (including my mother's side of the family) across the newly-established cease-fire lines that defined 'Israel' for the next twenty years. Eventually, the more than 400 villages that had been their homes were physically destroyed. The Palestinian Diaspora –what came to be known as the 'refugee problem'- was created. For me, all of this was to inform the years that followed, the years in which I grew up, and which I still live.

In the larger picture, of course, this window from which my perspective of the world grew, was pitifully tiny: during those years surrounding my birth the world was just beginning to awaken from the horrendous events of WW2 and its aftermath. The battle at al-Qastal, the massacre at the nearby village of Dir Yassin, the population migration caused by the war...all these '47-49 Palestinian events pale in scale when pitted against the ten-fold magnified like events –for example- of the pogroms and population displacements surrounding the partition of India around the same time. But it is so that we are necessarily born and grow up in tiny patches on earth, blind to the perspectives and pains of others in our regions, let alone of our kind.

The house I grew up in, and where I still live, lay at the exact border (cease-fire lines) separating Jordanian from Israel's Jerusalem. Much later I would find out that the great Israeli writer, Amos Oz, ten years older than me, was growing up on the other side of that same border, a few hundred meters to the north. In the early eighties, my wife and I took the trip to visit him in Arad, a town set in the dry southern hills where he had moved for health purposes. I still have his signed copy of *In the Land of Israel*, received during that visit –a report of selected conversations he had with an assortment of Palestinians and Israelis in the period leading up to the publication of the so-called 'Kahane report' on the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon. Fifteen years had already gone by since the 1967 war, when the house I lived in suddenly no longer found itself situated on the border, but had now become part of an expanded Israel, its eastern borders now lying along the Jordan river. One conversation Oz reports in his book is with the young Ali al-Khalili from Nablus in the West Bank- who had never seen Israelis before their tanks rolled into his town. He was shocked, he tells Oz, when 'a person' walked into his shop one day shortly after the war and introduced himself as an Israeli businessman. An Israeli 'person'? He hadn't realized there were such creatures! Israelis were either soldiers, policemen, or security officials! I got to know Ali –a

writer and journalist- many years later when he came to work at the local 'Fatah' newspaper in Jerusalem as an editor of the 'literary' page. 'Fatah' was the name of the by-then main Palestinian resistance movement, busily building up its military training camps in southern Lebanon, and recruiting its *fedayyeen* from the vast reservoir of Palestinians from the refugee camps there. Its iconic leader was Arafat –Abu Ammar, and the Israeli and international press had become used to calling its area of operations in Lebanon 'Fatahland'. It was Fatahland that Ariel Sharon wanted to invade Lebanon for and 'cleanse' of 'terrorists'—resulting in the massacre following Arafat's departure, but also in the birth of Israel's Peace Now movement, where Amos Oz –and a by-then weighty mass of Israelis- had found their 'Zionist' home.

Thirty six years have today passed since that Lebanese invasion, and Peace Now's golden past. During that past, and for all its achievements, Israel was still able to see itself as embodying a 'modest' Zionism, one that was best expressed, perhaps, in the call for negotiating a 'fair closure' of the conflict with the Palestinians. But things had meantime turned sour. Oslo failed. Israel dug its heels further into the '67-conquered lands. And 'Zionism' now came openly to mean expropriating the entire country for the benefit of the Jews, and contriving different ways to keep Palestinians under political lock and key. Was so-called 'modest' Zionism merely an aberration of a self-aggrandizing colonialist enterprise? Or is Israel an emergently created organism whose identity is, was, and can be subject to change? The different ways in which these questions are considered –not surprisingly- have defined Arab and Palestinian attitudes towards it—those who believe the differences with Israel are existential, and those who still believe –or have newly come to believe- they are negotiable.

The front-door conflict, and the questions accompanying it, still envelops my existence. But fortune would have it that I would step out of the door, and find myself in the England of the 60s during my late

teens. The conservative educational institution to which Father sent me constituted something of a cultural shock, and it was not long before I found myself pursuing my university qualifying exams in less conventional institutions in London and the north. Now, what I thought was a mere 'front-yard' conflict began to look more like being part of a post-WW2 newly evolving world, where the real 'confrontation' was between a revolutionary ideology promising the liberation of humanity on one side, and a capitalist system offering wealth for the few -and already invigorated with a resurgence of business enterprises accompanying the new bloodline of investments flooding Europe under the Marshall Plan- on the other. But from the perspective of the young crowds I moved in, this new 'order' simply seemed to pit the good against the bad. The contours of the larger political geography were still hazy in my mind, and the 'good' just seemed to be an assortment of anti-establishment demonstrations, Che Guevara and Castro, the IRA, Soho nightclubs, LSD, the Palestinian national movement, Mao's cultural revolution and struggling to read Lenin, *Das Kapital* and Rosa Luxemburg. The 'bad' was an assortment of LBJ, Zionism, capitalists, colonialism, and South African racism. I hadn't become fully aware yet of the theoretical need to make a fit between my nationalist grievances as a Palestinian and the class-based or simply 'human' internationalist slogans held up in the banners in the demonstrations I participated in – or the Beatles or Jimi Hendrix, for that matter, with the *fedayyeen*. Internationalist "Workers of the World: Unite and Fight!" slogans ran alongside "Free Palestine" and similar national liberation ones, and I easily swam in the currents of both. Needless to say, news of the suppression of individual freedoms on the other side of the 'Iron Wall' were quickly dismissed as capitalist propaganda or portrayed as leftovers of a backward bourgeois disease that had not yet been fully erased in the new socialist experiment. At the time 'sociology' seemed to be becoming *the* tool for understanding the world around us, and it is that for which I dropped physics and the like for my qualifying exams. London cafes –the 'Troubadour' on Fullham Road- were haunts where

would-be intellectuals and activists would pit Trotsky against Mao, discuss university upheavals in Italy and France, Cohn-Bendit and Tariq Ali, and plot for the major political event the following Sunday. The world looked like it was on the verge of a major upheaval, doing away with all the old and finally opening up for the people of the world to take control of their destinies. News from Paris told of university takeovers by students, factories coming to a halt, and the May '68 million 'workers and students' march out in the streets, causing De Gaulle to flee Paris for a few hours. News from across the Atlantic –and not just Timothy Leary physically installing himself and his small 'chemical factory' in King's Road -but civil rights unrest, the assassination of Martin Luther King, university upheavals, Woodstock, flower power, women and gay rights, and much more- also made it seem that the two oceanic shores had become welded together: that nationalities, citizenships, colors, genders, religions –had all been melted to make way for a new world order run by the have-nots of the world -or for a free disorder, as some would wish it to be as the harbinger of Utopia. However, as it turned out, the world was much larger than university campuses in the Sorbonne, Torino or the LSE, or such public spaces like the West End or the *Rive Gauche*: underneath or behind that dramatic upheaval –including the end of European colonial rule of 32 countries in Africa and the dismantlement of apartheid and release of Mandela from jail- it was not capitalism, but the Soviet Union which collapsed, and the Cultural Revolution which turned incendiary. If the sixties were an upper crest mish-mash of the fifties' new European wealth and the optimistic utopianism of the young generations and factory workers beginning to rear their heads after the war, and more widespread as well as higher family disposable incomes, it was the more embedded capitalist impulse, now reinforced by a surge in scientific and technological advances –also spurred by that same war and the regional ones to follow (or were imagined to follow)- that eventually seemed to be defining the new era. The 'United Nations', the 'Cold War', Nato, The European Coal and Steel Community,

technology, The World Bank, nuclear physics and commercial satellites, were among the more entrenched signposts of the emerging order.

The dawn of the seventies –defined primarily for me by the Oxford environment, but again still by London – still retained some of the flavor of the old, but was already pregnant with the new. British authorities were perhaps beginning to feel somewhat perturbed by the ‘foreign students’ studying at their institutions of learning –it was Cambridge’s Tariq Ali rather than its Salman Rushdie, later renowned for his *Satanic Verses*, that understandably piqued them at the time – and I was called in by one of my College officers to be told, politely but firmly, that political activism by foreigners was something that is seriously frowned upon, and could cause the authorities to cancel my visa in Britain. But it was mostly the gradual waning of the earlier avalanche of student protests more than this warning that saw me begin to take in what Oxford had to offer -socially mostly, but also academically (it was mostly by a stroke of luck that I finally managed to get a Third!). By that time I had thrown out sociology from my mind – though I still jumped on the opportunity to go to listen to Herbert Marcuse when he came once to give a lecture- and was beginning to focus on philosophy, which seemed to me to be where I could find the answers for the questions I sought, and which had been building up gradually in me from my earlier years. And as luck would have it -no academic grounds to justify or explain this- my main philosophy tutor, Oscar Wood, and as I would find out later from a book written about the famous philosopher of Law H.A.L. Hart, turned out in fact to have been the Oxford philosophers’ student ‘showpiece’ to Wittgenstein during this latter’s single invitation and visit he made to the university (even great scholars, I later found, sometimes behave as children when it comes to showing off being better than their peers). By the time he was my tutor Oscar Wood had not in fact written much. I guess that at the time the ‘publish or perish’ germ had not yet hit British universities.

I suppose it was enough in the old days to be tangibly clever, which my tutor certainly was, in many more ways than one.

In the years after the war, Cambridge of course could still boast of Bertrand Russell, but the editor of the much coveted *Mind*, Gilbert Ryle, was stationed in Oxford. Some 'academic squabbles' arose from this circumstance between the 'two sides' that merited –in the interlocutors' views- the need to apprise the general public of their disagreement in *Letters to The Times*! But there was much more to this than a squabble over whether a particular philosophical paper was accepted for publication, or for why it was refused: what do such eclectic philosophical or even Oxbridge squabbles matter in a war-ravaged country where only a privileged 5 percent of its youth population had access to a university education that anyway needed to be revamped in order to address the practical challenges Britain faced? Were metaphysical problems in philosophy anyway in the circumstances any longer useful, let alone meaningful? At Cambridge Wittgenstein was in his own way burrowing into these issues, but at Oxford a kind of collective effort in this field was already underway, spearheaded eventually after the war by J.L. Austin, a young star who was to make a major imprint in the field, but who unfortunately had passed away in 1960. Of course, philosophy was not the only or even most crucial subject being discussed or pursued at Oxford or other places when I was there: the advent of the 60s witnessed America setting its foot in Vietnam, and towards the end of that decade, also on the moon. By the time I went up to Oxford, as already said, it was technology, science, and business expansion that were the hallmark of that period, frantically trying to keep up with the rapid advancement in those fields across the Atlantic.

It was towards my last year at Oxford that my still-confused mind insidiously planted the idea in my head that I should turn my attention to Islam's intellectual heritage –perhaps even subject the Qur'an itself



to some kind of language analysis. I was in love with the philosophy I was doing, but beginning to feel estranged from my own culture. Perhaps, I thought, I could do some scholarly digging into that culture, where I had the impression there must be a lot of untapped intellectual wealth. At the same time, as I was already sufficiently overawed by philosophy's Oxford heritage, intellectual as well as physical, it seemed perfectly natural for me to find myself engaged in a relationship leading to marriage with Lucy, Austin's youngest daughter, who was reading Greats—a far more prestigious program than my PPE. Our route to Harvard, however, where I ended up writing a thesis on Avicenna, and which was initially encouraged by coming across the Egyptian-born and former Popper student A.H.Sabra at the Warburg Institute, took us through a two-year stint in Abu Dhabi, right around the time of the 'October War' between Egypt and Israel, and in the midst of the negotiations between major oil companies and Gulf States over what was called 'Participation'—an alternative to the upfront threat of nationalization. These were the early years of the Gulf, where a major experiment in political federation and state building was beginning to take shape. Dubai still boasted a lovely port adorned with those elegant dowses that were used both for fishing and smuggling gold from India; Sharjah boasted an International Airport whose actual size, I amusingly kept reminding myself, did not exceed the now defunct strip of our local pre-'67 'Kalandia airport' in Jerusalem, from where I first flew in an airplane; other Emirates only boasted pristine nature and empty golden beaches. Abu Dhabi itself was already the center of attraction of Arabs from all over the Arab world, three of my older siblings and many Palestinians included, as well as other Asians from across the Gulf, all of whom had come to benefit themselves of the impending economic boom: a promising country in the making. Visiting it today is nothing less than the beholding of a miracle.

But it was to pursue my studies in the United States—where Sabra had already taken up a chair in the History of Science- that I decided to

head as soon as the opportunity presented itself. The East Coast of course is not America, but I am not abashed to admit the excitement I felt as the plane came to land in Boston, and –as a foreigner used to racial discrimination in England- the later comforting sense of being welcomed by an Anglophone nation! (I was amused to read, many years later, in a book by Amartya Sen, how the immigration officer at Heathrow Airport had assumed the job the distinguished professor was taking up in Cambridge and for which he had just arrived in London was that as a butler at the college!). My life at Harvard during those years proved to be an enriching experience, and contrasted with earlier student life in England, far more serious and even business-like: Harvard undergraduates did not seem to be interested in social issues, let alone in world problems, and they seemed to devote themselves almost entirely to ensuring good jobs for themselves after graduation. Nixon and Watergate were already done with by '74, and Gerald Ford's Presidency did not seem to carry any excitement with it, especially contrasted with that of his successor. Jimmy Carter's entry onto the stage (we watched it on TV) was in itself an exciting event, making full use of Hollywood-style visual techniques; but the excitement of a new Democratic President did not stop at that: one of his first acts in office was the general pardon of the Vietnam War evaders. Also, soon after his election Carter breathed life into the Middle East conflict, eventually succeeding in making peace between Egypt and Israel. The Arab world was not happy with this breakthrough, and Palestinians especially were peeved. Many years later, when I brought the subject up with Arafat, he implied to me –he was very careful when he touched on sensitive subjects like this- that had the opposition pressure on him from his peers and constituency not been of the strength it was he would have joined hands with Sadat and the talks at Camp David. I wonder to this day whether such reticence as he exercised at the time –if true- should count as a failure in his policies or a success: maybe if he had joined Sadat, he would have lost his leadership of the Palestinian people, and the national movement he led would have anyway therefore been kept

out of the peace game. Remaining in charge, on the other hand, would have allowed him when the opportunity arose to step in, as he did at Oslo. Assuming –like I do- that his eyes were anyway set on making a deal with Israel, then one could conclude that his reticence at the time reflected a keen political sense.

While abroad in the States, the nitty-gritty of politics at home did not constitute a major area of focus for me. Apart from burrowing into medieval philosophic texts under the guidance of Muhsin Mahdi and A.I.Sabra, and studying Frege with W.V.O. Quine and attending classes by, among others, Robert Nozick and Martha Nussbaum, I had little time or space left in my mind to think about the situation back home. My parents were in the thick of it –father now acting as a front-line public figure interacting with Israeli and foreign visiting politicians, and mother with street demonstrators and the families of prisoners. But when Walid Khalidi –a veteran Palestinian scholar in exile- visited Harvard and gave a talk about his paper ‘Thinking the Unthinkable’, published in the seventies, and envisioning negotiations between the PLO and Israel for a mini-Palestinian state, I was sufficiently irritated by the idea that I felt compelled to attend his talk. In my view at the time, the ‘67 war was not such a catastrophe for us; rather, it offered a perfect long-term setting for a future in which Israelis and Palestinians can finally live together in an undivided country as equals, without reference to religion, ethnicity, or other factors. The ‘nascent confusion’ in my mind between nationalism and a secular political system where human beings can live as equals by virtue of belonging to their common humanity was not yet resolved. It wasn’t until later, when I left Harvard to start teaching in the West Bank, that this confusion in my mind began to be resolved –at least for a decade or two- in favor of a two-state solution. But that, as I said, only came later.

Besides Sadat’s historic visit to the Knesset in 1977 –which angered Palestinians, including my father, who saw it as an affront to, and a sell-

out of the Palestinian cause, and a harbinger of a second-class status of autonomy for people in the occupied territories; but by which I, watching his speech from the States, was totally mesmerized, if for no other reason than for how a single individual can turn the tide of history- there were two books that came out during that period that in an altogether different setting, seemed to me to embody this dilemma of conflicting perspectives, Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the Cooke and Crone book *Hagarism*. While the first was a critical commentary on an entire Western scholarly tradition responsible for bringing to modern attention the intellectual wealth of the early Islamic world, it wasn't hard to see the second, on the birth of Islam, as a paradigm of the 'accusatory' thesis presented in the first. Yet I couldn't but feel that –notwithstanding the haughty attitude and oftentimes political motivations of some orientalists- the Arab world was indebted to the early German and other scholars who had begun to 'retrieve' neglected manuscripts from the past, paving the way for a contemporary revival of Islamic studies. After all, I was myself already digging into some of these retrieved manuscripts in preparation for my thesis. Was the world, really, so black and white? Indeed, it wasn't hard for me to see more generally how first-person and second-person narratives can be so distinct from one another, each being informed by and suited to the circumstance or political motivations of the narrator. I was first made aware of such a chasm immediately after '67 when, jumping over the wall in our back-garden that had been the border for a 'no-man's land' separating us from the orthodox Jewish quarter in West Jerusalem, I ventured to walk, one step at a time, towards the other side, until reaching it, I turned back to look from that side at what our house, on the east side, must have looked like to those 'strange creatures' I used to see watching me from there as I watched them. That was the first of many 'ventures' I would later take- many 'journeys'- into my enemy's territory. It is a journey I still believe each of us has to undertake on a daily basis, even with one's loved ones.

It wasn't until I finally returned home to settle during the summer of '78 –my head still filled with eclectic philosophical ideas- that 'my world' became almost entirely 'my home'. I do not deny having had transient day-dreams –both before, and since then - of settling in a cottage in the Cotswolds and lecturing at Oxford, or enjoying the good life of an academic at some liberal arts college in the States, but there was never really a serious question in my mind about in fact returning home after my degrees and 'putting myself in the 'educational service of my less-fortunate compatriots' –as I rationalized this move to myself. I still think it was the right decision, though it perhaps had more to do with a deep psychological –even cowardly- need to return to the safety of my mother's womb, as it were, than anything more grand. As it turned out, however, this subconscious impulse to settle into an easy life, where I could insulate myself from the real world and pursue a parochial academic career saw me being thrown instead into the midst of a politically vibrant campus where students saw themselves not primarily as scholars but as civil soldiers whose primary task was to resist Israel's occupation of their land. In no time the roles were switched and instead of being the teacher I found myself at the learning end, my students enacting before my eyes the intellectual and practical life of moral agents. In a way, the 'eighties' in the West Bank and Gaza were a more dangerous but applied reenactment of the 'sixties' – where, once again, a political and social rebellion was being waged against injustice; but where the price being paid in being shot or beaten or jailed or having the entire campus closed down by army orders far exceeded anything I had imagined happening in the real world. In the classroom, it wasn't hard to discuss the 'Melian dialogue', because students instinctively identified themselves with the Melian's right to be free in the face of a military regime for whom 'right' consisted simply in the military orders it issued. It wasn't hard to discuss what having a will means, because one or the other of them will jump in to give a lived example of a how to withstand the physical and psychological torture meant to extract information by the interrogator.

My students were heroes. Many years later, post-Oslo, many of them would stand at the helm of political parties and hold important jobs in the Palestinian administration. Some of them, however, like Marwan Barghouti, still languish in jail.

Sharon's successful incursion into Lebanon, meant to wipe out Fatahland and the Palestinian national movement, paradoxically saw this movement bursting alive in the occupied territories, its flames being ignited and kept aglow by a growing student movement in university campuses across the West Bank and Gaza. Military orders meant to suppress this movement only resulted in further opposition, ultimately leading to the first *intifada*, and the widest civil disobedience campaign since the '67 occupation began. This was a unique uprising, strategized step-by-step in the first two years on two complementary fronts: to disgorge the population of every civilian attachment to the 20-year old governance system of the occupying power –through resignations from administrative posts set up by the army to facilitate their military rule, refusal to pay taxes, non-adherence to permits or orders, worker pull-outs from sites and businesses inside Israel- on the one hand; and through a gradual assumption of self-rule in every aspect of life by the people themselves, from garbage-collecting to health. The general push was for 'extracting' our civilian life (politically and economically) from Israeli rule, and preparing the grounds for an ultimate declaration of independence. The general assumption was that this would pave the way for a negotiated two-state settlement with Israel. I remember thinking at the time this collective peoples' effort must be the closest thing to witnessing what one can understand by the expression "a peoples' revolution" that one finds mentioned in history books. Everyone was a participant in their different ways, and the toll in wounded, killed and jailed, in proportion to the size of the population, affected every single family. Strikes, demonstrations and marches were the order of the day, met by army incursions into villages, curfews, and closures of institutions. Besides holding classes

off-campus, and anticipating shutdowns in our media outlets, I set up with a network of colleagues a 'news room' to record as many events as possible that were happening across the occupied territories. Underground leaflets by the clandestine leadership appeared on the 9<sup>th</sup> of every month, containing a political statement and a daily program of civil disobedience actions to be undertaken by the population in their different regions. It was primarily the moral and political message of this *intifada*, followed by Iraq's downfall in the first Gulf War, that set the stage for Baker's success in pulling off the Madrid conference, when the so-called 'peace process' was initiated. This was followed up in the Washington talks, and finally sealed in Oslo. Unsurprisingly, my 'intellectual journey' through the eighties found me having become entirely captive to my political surroundings, where I became convinced that the attainment of the simplest individual rights of this population cannot be achieved without ridding ourselves of the occupation. The 'two-state' solution therefore came to seem to me to be both natural and necessary, and I quickly found myself after a short prison stint involved in the technical and political work supporting the peace talks.

Whether then, or later –as I found myself over the next two decades building a university institution in Jerusalem while watching the slow death of Oslo- my focus of interest remained fixed on my local situation, and on how our rights as Palestinians could be achieved. World events, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and the *intifadas* that swept the former Soviet satellites, followed by the vicissitudes of political change and conflict in those regions; the Arab Spring that first erupted in Tunisia and the rise of the atavistic militias in Iraq and Syria; the downfall of Mubarak or the ongoing war in the Yemen; Brexit or the election of Trump : all these mattered less to me than continuing to wonder how we as Palestinians can both maintain our identity and heritage and live as equals on our land. In this land, now that Israel has reached its 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, the 'Palestinian journey' continues to be as uncertain in its direction as it seemed on Israel's birth. Always in the

past, as now, it wasn't clear whether we were headed towards an independent state, or instead to an apartheid that will lead to a one-man/one-vote system in the entire country disputed by the two sides. Was it ever any less unsure in the wider world? Perhaps not. Watching the yellow-vests protests on the news in France, hearing and reading about capitalism's failure to address the growing gulf between the world's rich and poor, pondering the financial earthquakes that recently shook and are still expected to shake the capitalist enterprise – all side by side with the reappearance of a populist chauvinism that seeks to fracture human harmony I cannot but wonder whether we are not back where it all started back in the sixties, when injustice in the world couldn't but unleash a widespread backlash. The lack of certainty about where things were really headed at any one time, never mind where they seemed to be heading at that time means, today, that the past I have been part of remains as frustratingly inscrutable as the future. Regardless of how solid the ground under my feet felt at any one time, in retrospect it turns out to have been, as it now is, floating in suspended space. Living on earth, I suppose this observation shouldn't come as a surprise for me.