

Gaza and the Failure of the Imagination  
by Rich Homa

A long time ago, when I was of high school age or even younger, I came across an item in a *Readers Digest* humor section about a couple of siblings who had begun to quarrel and had in fact begun to get physical in the conduct of their dispute. When the mother intervened and demanded to know what was going on, one of the kids pointed at the other and shouted, "It all started when he hit me back".

I thought that was a pretty funny line, delivered as it was by a five or six year old kid whose weapons were shoves and kicks and punches. But I don't think it's very funny at all when it's delivered by Ehud Olmert or Mahmoud Zahar, whose weapons are rockets and mortars and bombs. And yet to my mind that kindergarten accusation is in substance precisely what those two alleged grownups are using to justify their execrable behavior. The prospect of listening yet again to the two sides' sixty-plus-year litanies of grievances and recriminations fills me with a vast weariness, and I have to admit that I am sometimes more eager to hear the whining stop than the killing.

I have no solution to offer for the horrors taking place in the Gaza Strip and throughout Israel, the latest downward spiral in decades of ever worse behavior, of misconduct being responded to by worse misconduct. In fact, I doubt very much that there is a solution, that circumstances allow there to be one, at this time. That is not to say that there never can be a solution, only that if it does emerge it will, I believe, do so from a context very different from the one that prevails today. Moreover, I don't see how we, as far removed from the conflict as we are, both geographically and psychologically, can do very much to bring about that context. All I am going to do today, instead, is to correct what I think is a fundamental error about the nature of the conflict and to identify what I think is the essential obstacle to action leading to a solution.

The error, as I see it, is the notion that the fighting in Gaza is a religious war. On the contrary, I believe that religion in fact has next to nothing to do with it.

Please withhold your outraged disbelief at this point while I tell you a little story. I once worked with a man who, like me, was born in the United States but, unlike me, was Catholic. He told me once about a visit he made to Northern Ireland where he got to know a gentleman who was a Protestant, and not a very enlightened Protestant at that.

The friendship progressed to the point where the Orangeman suggested Len forsake his hotel and stay with his family. When he reluctantly, and with some apprehension, disclosed his religious affiliation, his would-be host waved away the issue with the remark, "That's all right. You're an American, after all."

That story led me to the conviction that the difference between Catholic versus Protestant in Belfast, or the difference between Muslim versus Jew in Gaza, has about as much to do with the conflicts in those places as the difference between green and gold versus purple and white have to do with the periodic contests in Lambeau Field. They are all simply ways for the two sides to tell one another apart; the *real* differences between them have an entirely different basis.

As Antonio says in *Merchant of Venice*, "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose". And it doesn't matter whether that Scripture is the Christian Bible, the Tanakh, or the Quran. There are passages in all of them that can be interpreted as encouraging hatred and violence and separation from one's fellow human beings. But there are also these passages - from the Tanakh:

Proverbs 16:32: Better to be forbearing than mighty, to have self-control than conquer a city.

Proverbs 24:29: Do not say: 'I will do so to him what he did to me; I will pay the man what he deserves.'

Psalms 37:8: Give up anger, abandon fury, do not be vexed; it can only do harm.

Jeremiah 7:1-7

The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD: Stand at the gate of the House of the LORD, and there proclaim this word: Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah who enter these gates to worship the LORD!

Thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel: Mend your ways and your actions, and I will let you dwell in this place. Don't put your trust in illusions and say, "The Temple of the LORD, the Temple of the LORD, the Temple of the LORD are these buildings." No, if you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between one man and another; if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, and the widow; if you do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place; if you do not follow

other gods, to your own hurt - then only will I let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers for all time.

And from the Quran:

Sura 7:199: Keep to forgiveness, and enjoin kindness, and turn away from the ignorant.

Sura 8:54: These will be given their reward twice over, because they are steadfast and repel evil with good, and spend of that wherewith We have provided them.

Sura 5:12-13 Allah made a covenant of old with the Children of Israel and We raised among them twelve chieftains, and Allah said: Lo! I am with you. If ye establish worship and pay the poor-due, and believe in My messengers and support them, and lend unto Allah a kindly loan, surely I shall remit your sins, and surely I shall bring you into Gardens underneath which rivers flow. Whoso among you disbelieveth after this will go astray from a plain road.

And because of their breaking their covenant, We have cursed them and made hard their hearts. They change words from their context and forget a part of that whereof they were admonished. Thou wilt not cease to discover treachery from all save a few of them. But bear with them and pardon them. Lo! Allah loveth the kindly.

If a person refuses to read, or having read, refuses to abide by passages such as those above, is it the fault of the religion in whose scriptures those passages appear? If individual responsibility means anything, I believe the answer must be no.

What, then, is the conflict in Gaza really about? It is about the same thing as all high-stakes conflicts: resources, of course. Now, one of those resources is land, and part of the confusion surrounding the conflict is the pretense that it is the "holiness" of parts of that land that is driving people apart. But talking about the Western Wall or the Temple Mount as holy in this context is less an acknowledgement of sanctity than an expression of sanctimoniousness. If the instigators of this conflict really want people to believe that they value holiness then they are going to have to start doing some holy things, instead of the usual lying and threatening and killing. Otherwise they emphasize my point that for them religion is not a basis but a pretext for conflict.

But fighting over resources is something that any animal can do. Why

haven't the procedures that human beings have worked out for resolving such things peacefully accomplished anything? There are enough historical and cultural factors that have conspired to obstruct a peaceful solution to fill several books, but it seems to me that they have pretty much all operated through the same basic mechanism to accomplish that obstruction, and that is by creating a failure of the imagination.

Some months ago, I came across a remark by the novelist Michael Chabon, author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*:

"To me, imagination is the key to morality. If you can't imagine what it is to live in someone else's head, then you're more likely to hurt them."

About a week ago, I learned that Adam Smith had spent over 400 pages elaborating on this very idea in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, first published 250 years ago this very year.

And then a couple of days ago I was listening to the radio and heard Kathleen Dunn interviewing Berkeley psychology professor Dacher Keltner, author of *Born to be Good*, which in essence presents the scientific evidence for Smith's centuries-old insight.

To attempt to summarize Smith's very complex argument in a few words, let me quote from the preface to an online edition of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, written by Eamonn Butler:

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith asks that most fundamental question: Why do we regard certain actions or intentions with approval and condemn others? At the time, opinion was divided: some held that the only standard of right and wrong was the law and the sovereign who made it; others, that moral principles could be worked out rationally, like the theorems of mathematics.

Smith took a completely new direction, holding that people are born with a moral sense, just as they have inborn ideas of beauty or harmony. Our conscience tells us what is right and wrong: and that is something innate, not something given us by lawmakers or by rational analysis. And to bolster it we also have a natural fellow-feeling, which Smith calls "sympathy". Between them, these natural senses of conscience and sympathy ensure

that human beings can and do live together in orderly and beneficial social organizations.

So our morality is the product of our nature, not our reason.

What Butler doesn't mention is that Smith regarded sympathy as a form of imagination. To put this in evolutionary terms, it is true that human beings share with their fellow animals certain physical needs which, given certain neurological structures which we also have in common, can dispose us toward conflict with other people. On the other hand, unlike other animals, our principle instrument of survival is not any physical capability but the power of our minds to learn from experience. All animals have this power to some extent, but none have, except in the most rudimentary form, the capacity to learn from the experience of others, and not only in their immediate presence. Nor do they seem to have any capacity to formulate quasi-experiences out of thin air, which we can use to guide our actions *as if* they actually happened. These abilities to incorporate into our own experiences those of other people and 'what if' scenarios created by slicing and dicing real events and perceptions and rearranging them, constitute what we call imagination. The power of imagination gives us unparalleled versatility and adaptability; we can encounter situations that we have never physically encountered as if we had met them and dealt with them a hundred times before. But for our imagination to be fully effective in this way, when we are imagining another person's experience, we have to imagine not only the physical context but the feelings of that person, to 'feel that person's pain' in a sense. And 'feeling with' or 'common feeling' are the words which, in Greek, give rise to our word 'sympathy', and in Latin, are the roots of our word 'compassion'.

Now, there are three very important things you need to understand about sympathy, or compassion, or whatever you want to call it.

The first is that it is an *individual* faculty, as individual as a smile, as individual as tears. Committees cannot sympathize, corporations cannot sympathize, congregations cannot sympathize, governments cannot sympathize, any more than they can beam with pleasure or weep with grief.

The second is that it cannot be bottled. It cannot be enacted into a law or a regulation or embodied in a company's policies and procedures. It can only be cultivated by the individual, fed by the individual's own interactions with others and by the more concentrated

fare of art, warmed and lit from within by the glow of a humble and earnest heart.

The third is that while it cannot be bottled, it *can* be bottled *up*.

I am only going to mention one of the forces that tend to bottle up our sympathetic imagination, and that is war. Since the state of Israel was born out of war and is still formally at war with most of its adversaries, the mentality that feeds on and into war is so important a factor in the Gaza tragedy that it should do very well to illustrate my point.

Listen now to the voice of Thomas Hardy's imaginary soldier in his poem "The Man He Killed":

Had he and I but met  
By some old ancient inn,  
We should have set us down to wet  
Right many a nipperkin!

But ranged as infantry,  
And staring face to face,  
I shot at him as he at me,  
And killed him in his place.

I shot him dead because--  
Because he was my foe,  
Just so: my foe of course he was;  
That's clear enough; although

He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,  
Off-hand like--just as I--  
Was out of work--had sold his traps--  
No other reason why.

Yes; quaint and curious war is!  
You shoot a fellow down  
You'd treat, if met where any bar is,  
Or help to half a crown.

Never having been in battle myself, I can't judge that soldier authoritatively, but it seems to me that he deserves a medal, not for what he did during the war but for what he did afterward: for winning the titanic struggle to regain his humanity.

Golda Meir once made what has to be one of the wisest remarks ever by a professional politician: "I can forgive you for killing my sons, but I cannot forgive you for forcing me to kill your sons."

As I understand it, what she is saying here is that there is always a possibility, when a loved one is killed, that it will bring out the best in you; but killing another person can only bring out the worst in you. That is because in order to kill people, you have to pretend that they are something other than human beings. You have to twist and corrupt your imagination to a use exactly contrary to its evolutionary purpose: not to make a connection to another human being, but to deny that the connection exists, that the other human being even exists as such. And once you have killed, you can erase that pretense and restore your proper connection to your fellow humans only by the most heroic effort, and at the cost of accepting the terrible responsibility for what you did. And perhaps the most arduous part of that effort is that of cleansing your imagination of the taint of misuse.

There is a story that is very popular in the Muslim world. It is said that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had a favorite cat named Muezza. Some say that Muezza was especially dear to his human companion because the cat had saved him from a poisonous snake, but perhaps it was simply that he was particularly adept at curling himself around human hearts. In any case, one day as the Prophet was answering the call to prayer, he found Muezza asleep on the sleeve of his robe. To allow the cat to sleep on undisturbed, Muhammad (pbuh) cut the sleeve off, and went off to prayer with the truncated garment. When Muhammad (pbuh) returned, Muezza bowed in gratitude and appreciation. The Prophet, touched by the cat's gesture, then stroked Muezza three times down the length of his back. The first stroke endowed him and his kind with the power always to land on their feet when they fall. The second granted him and his kind three times three lives. And the third assured him and his kind automatic entry into Paradise.

On September 11, 2001, as I watched the images of the burning towers on the television screen, a picture popped into my mind. I thought I saw Muhammad (pbuh) in Paradise, sitting with his sweet Muezza on his lap, and the cat was purring and treading for all he was worth, trying to comfort his friend. But there could be no comfort, as the tears streamed down his cheeks at the sight of what was being done in his name. And standing in back of him one on each side were Jesus and Moses (peace be unto them both) each with a hand on his

shoulder. And they too wept, at the thought of what had been done, and was being done, and would be done in their names.

What have we done to ourselves when we can't even feel compassion toward our own prophets?

The essential conflict in the Gaza is not between Israeli and Palestinian, or Jew and Muslim; like all other conflicts, it is between humanity and inhumanity, and the fiercest fighting takes place not between armies or even between individuals, but *within* individuals. This is what the Sufi and others in the Muslim tradition who emphasize the internals of their religion say is the true meaning of 'jihad': the struggle to overcome our animal fears and hatreds with our uniquely human capacity for compassion, what Doris Lessing calls the 'substance of we feeling'. Unless and until we have fought and won our own jihads, unless and until we have removed the beams from our own eyes, unless and until we can appear before the warring parties in a spirit of lovingkindness, having purged our desire to judge and scold and threaten, we will be of no use in the cause of ending the violence. If, however, we accomplish these things, by searching the depths of our own souls we shall find one another there. And then our prophets can dry their eyes and join us in partaking of the rebirth of hope in our hearts as we begin to talk.

Peace/Salaam/Shalom