"We should stand together – Jews, Muslims and Christians"

01.12.2014 | George Deek*

When I walk in the streets of my home town Jaffa, I am often reminded of the year 1948. The Alleys of the old city, the houses in Ajami neighborhood, the fishing nets at the port – they all seem to tell different stories about the year that has changed my city forever. One of those stories is about one of the oldest families in this ancient city – the Deek family – my own.

Before 1948 my grandfather George, after whom I'm named, worked as an electrician, at the Rotenberg Electricity Company. He was not very interested in politics. And since Jaffa was a mixed city, he naturally had some Jewish friends. In fact, his friends at the electricity company even taught him Yiddish, making him one the first Arabs to ever speak the language.

In 1947 He got engaged to Vera – My grandmother – and together they had plans to build a family in the same city where the Deek family has lived for about 400 years – Jaffa. But a few months later, those plans changed, literally overnight.

When the U.N. approved the establishment of Israel, and a few months the State of Israel was established, the Arab leaders warned the Arabs that the Jews are planning to kill them if they stay home, and they used the Deir Yassin massacre as an example. They told everyone: 'Leave your houses, and run away'. They said they will need just a few days, in which with 5 armies they promised to destroy the newly born Israel. My family, horrified by what might happen, decided to flee, with most others.

A priest was rushed to the Deek family's house, and he wedded George and Vera my grandparents, in the house, in haste. My grandmother did not even have a chance to get a proper dress. After their sudden wedding, the entire family started fleeing north, towards Lebanon.

But when the war was over, the Arabs failed to destroy Israel.

My family was at the other side of the border, and it seemed that the fate of the brothers and sisters of the Deek family was to be scattered around the globe. Today, I have relatives in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Dubai, the U.K., Canada, the U.S., Australia, and more. The story of my family is

just one – and probably not the worst – among the many tragic stories of the year 1948.

And to be frank, you don't need to be an anti-Israeli to acknowledge the humanitarian disaster of the Palestinians in 1948, namely the Nakba.

The fact that I have to skype with relatives in Canada who don't speak Arabic, or a cousin in an Arab country that still has no citizenship there, despite being a third generation– is a living testimony to the tragic consequences of the war.

According to the U.N. 711 thousand Palestinians were displaced, we've heard that before – some fled and some forcefully expelled. At the same time, because of the establishment of Israel, 800 thousand Jews were intimidated into leaving the Arab world, leaving mostly empty of Jews. As we've heard before, atrocities from both sides were not uncommon. But it seems that this conflict was not the only one during the 19th and 20th century that lead to expulsion and transfer.

From 1821 to 1922, 5 million Muslims were expelled from Europe, mostly to Turkey.

In the 90's Yoguslavia broke apart, leading to 100,000 people dead and about 3 million displaced.

From 1919 to 1949, during the Visla operation between Poland and Ukraine, 150,000 people died, and 1.5 million were displaced.

Following World War II and the Potsdam convention, between 12-17 million Germans were displaced.

When India and Pakistan were established, about 15 million people were transferred.

This trend also exists in the Middle East.

For example the displacement of 1.1 million Kurds by the Ottomans,

2.2 million Christians who were expelled from Iraq,

And as we speak today, Yazidis, Bahai, Kurds, Christians and even Muslims are being killed and expelled in a rate of 1,000 people per month, following the rise of Radical Islam.

The chances of any of those groups to return to their homes, is almost non-existent.

So why is it then,

Why is it that the tragedies of the Serbs, the European Muslims, the Polish refugees or the Iraqi Christians are not commemorated?

How come the displacement of the Jews from the Arab world was completely forgotten, while the tragedy of the Palestinians, the Nakba, is still alive in today's politics?

It seems to me to be so, because the Nakba has been transformed from a humanitarian disaster to a political offensive. The commemoration of the Nakba is no longer about remembering what happened, but about resenting the mere existence of the state of Israel.

It is demonstrated most clearly in the date chosen to commemorate it:

The Nakba day is not April 9th – the day of the Deir Yassin massacre,

Or July 13th – the day of the expulsion from Lod.

The Nakba day was set on May 15th – the day after Israel proclaimed its independence.

By that the Palestinian leadership declared that the disaster of the Nakba is not the expulsion, the abandoned villages or the exile – the Nakba in their eyes in the creation of Israel.

They are saddened less by the humanitarian catastrophe that befell on Palestinians, and more by the revival of the Jewish state. In other words: they do not mourn the fact that my cousins are Jordanians, they mourn the fact that I am an Israeli.

By doing so, The Palestinians have become slaves to the past, held captive by the chains of resentment, prisoners in the world of frustration and hate.

But friends,

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The evident yet simple truth is – that in order not to be reduced to sorrow and bitterness, we must look forward. To put it more clearly: To mend the past, first you have to secure the future.

This is something I learned from my music teacher, Avraham Nov.

When I was 7 years old I joined the marching band of the Arab-Christian community in Jaffa. That's where I met Avraham, my music teacher, who taught me to play the flute and later the clarinet. I was good. Avraham is a holocaust survivor, and his entire family was murdered by the Nazis. He was the only one who managed to survive, because a certain Nazi officer found him gifted in playing the harmonica, so he took him home during the war to entertain his guests. When the war was over and he was left alone, he could have easily sat, and wept and cried over the greatest crime of man against man in history, and over the fact that he left alone. But he didn't, he looked forward not backwards; He chose life, not death; Hope , rather than despair; Avraham came to Israel, got married, built a family, and he started teaching the same thing that saved his life – music. He became the music teacher of hundreds and thousands of children all over the country. And when he saw the tension between Arabs and Jews, this holocaust survivor decided to teach hope through music to hundreds of Arab children like me. Holocaust survivors like Avraham are among the most extraordinary people you can find.

I was always curious to understand how they were able to survive, knowing what they knew, seeing what they saw. But throughout the 15 years I have known Avraham when I was his student, he never spoke about his past, except once – When I demanded to know.

What I came to realize was that Avraham was not the only one, and that many Holocaust survivors did not speak about those years, about the holocaust, even to their families, sometimes for decades, or even a lifetime.

Only when they had secured the future did they allow themselves to look back at the past. Only when they had built a time of hope they permitted themselves to remember the days of despair.

They built the future in their old-new home, the state of Israel.

And under the shadows of their greatest tragedy, Jews were able to build a country that leads the world in medicine, agriculture and technology –

Why? Because they looked forward.

Friends, this is a lesson to every nation that wishes to overcome a tragedy – including the

Palestinians.

If the Palestinians wish to redeem the past, they need to first focus on securing a future, on building a world as it should be, as our children deserve it to be.

And the first step in that direction, without a doubt, is to end the shameful treatment of the Palestinian refugees.

In the Arab world, the Palestinian refugees – including their children, their grandchildren and even their great-grandchildren – are still not settled, aggressively discriminated against, and in most cases denied citizenship and basic human rights.

Why is it, that my relatives in Canada are Canadian citizens, while my relatives in Syria, Lebanon or the gulf countries – who were born there and know no other home – are still considered refugees?

Clearly, the treatment of the Palestinians in the Arab countries is the greatest oppression they experience anywhere.

And the collaborators in this crime are no other than the international community and the United Nations.

Rather than doing its job and help the refugees build a life, the international community is feeding the narrative of the victimhood.

While there is one U.N. agency in charge of all refugees in the world – the UNHCR, another agency was established to deal only with the Palestinian ones – UNRWA.

This is no coincidence – while the goal of the UNHCR is to help refugees establish a new home, establish a future and end their status as refugees, the goal of UNRWA is opposite: to preserve their status as refugees, and prevent them from being able to start new lives.

The International community cannot seriously expect the refugee problem to be solved, when it is collaborating with the Arab world in treating the refugees' as political pawns, denying them the

basic rights they deserve.

Wherever the Palestinian refugees were granted equal rights – they prospered and contributed to their society – In South America, in the U.S., and even in Israel.

In fact, Israel was one of the few countries that automatically gave full citizenship and equality for all Palestinians in it after ‘48.

And we see the results: despite all the challenges, the Arab citizens of Israel built a future. Israeli Arabs are the most educated Arabs in the world, with the best living standards and opportunities in the region. Arabs serve as judges in the Supreme Court; Some of the best doctors in Israel are Arabs, working in almost every hospital in the country; There are 13 Arab members of parliament who enjoy the right to criticize the government – a right that they exhaust to the fullest – protected by the freedom of speech; Arabs win popular reality shows; And you can even find Arab diplomats – and one of them is standing in front of you.

Today, when I walk the streets of Jaffa, I see the old buildings and the old port, but I also see children going to school and university; I see flourishing businesses; and I see a vibrant culture. In short, despite the fact that we still have a long road ahead of us as a minority, we have a future in Israel.

This brings me to my next point-

Time has come to put an end the culture of hatred and incitement- because Anti-Semitism, I believe, is a threat to Muslims and Christians, as much as for Jews.

I arrived to Norway just over two years ago, and here was the first time that I interacted with Jews as a minority community. I’m usually… used to seeing them as a majority. And I have to say, it looks very familiar.

I grew up in a similar environment, in the Arab-Christian community in Jaffa. I was part of the Orthodox Christians, who are part of the Christian community, who are part of the Arab minority, in the Jewish State of Israel, in the Muslim Middle East.

It’s like those Russian dolls, you open a big one and there’s a smaller one inside? I’m the smallest piece.

A Jew in Norway or an Arab in Israel, being a minority means that you are always a part of a small community where everyone cares for each other and supports each other; It's a beautiful thing to know that no matter what, you always have a community that will care about you.

Being part of a minority community has been a blessing throughout my life. But friends, the life of a minority is also a life of constant struggle for fair treatment. Sometimes you are discriminated, and might even be a victim of hate crimes. Even in a democracy like Israel, being an Arab minority is not always easy.

Just over a year ago, a bunch of price tag bullies walked into the Arab Christian cemetery in Jaffa, and they desecrated the graves with writings "death to the Arabs", and one on the graves in that cemetery, was my father's. Being a minority my friends is a challenge anywhere, because being a minority means being different.

And no nation has ever paid a heavier price for being a minority, being different, than the Jewish people. The history of the Jewish people added many words to the human vocabulary: words like expulsion, forced conversion, inquisition, ghetto, pogrom, not to mention the word holocaust. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks explains accurately, that the Jews suffered throughout the ages, because they were different. Because they were the most significant non-Christian minority in Europe, and today the most significant non-Muslim minority in the Middle East; but friends, in fact – aren't we all different?

The truth is: being different is what makes us human!

Every person, every culture, every religion is unique, and therefore irreplaceable.

And a Europe, or a Middle East, that has no room for Jews, has no room for humanity.

Friends, let's not forget:

Anti-Semitism may begin with Jews, but it never ends with Jews. Jews were not the only ones to be forcefully converted under the inquisition; Hitler made sure that gypsies and homosexuals, among others, suffered alongside the Jews;

And it is happening now again, this time in the Middle East.

The Arab world seems to have forgotten that its greatest days in the last 1,400 years were when it showed tolerance and openness towards those who are different.

The genius mathematician Ibn Musa el-Khawazmi was Uzbeki,

The great Philosopher Rumi was Persian,

The glorious leader Salah a-din was Kurdish,

The founder of Arab nationalism was Michel Aflaq – a Christian,

And the one who brought the Islamic rediscovery of Plato and Aristotle to the rest of the world was Maimonides – a Jew.

But rather than reviving the successful approach of tolerance, Arab youth are being taught to hate Jews, using anti-Semitic rhetoric from medieval Europe, mixed with Islamic radicalism.

And once again, what started as hostility towards Jews has become hostility towards anyone who is different.

Just last week more than 60,000 Kurds fled from Syria towards Turkey, afraid of being slaughtered.

On the same day, 15 Palestinians from Gaza drowned in the sea trying to escape the claws of Hamas;

Bahai and Yazidis are at risk.

And on top of it all, the ethnic cleansing of Christians in the Middle East is the biggest crime against humanity in the 21st century. In just two decades Christians like me have been reduced from 20% of the population of the Middle East to a mere 4% today.

And when we see that the main victims of Islamist violence are Muslims, it is getting clear to everyone – At the end of the day, hate destroys the hater.

So friends,

If we wish to succeed in protecting our right to be different, if we want to have a future in that region, I believe we should stand together – Jews, Muslims and Christians:

We will fight for the right of Christians everywhere to live their faith without fear, with the same passion with which we will fight for the right of Jews to live without fear.

We will fight against Islamophobia, but we need our Muslims partners to join the fight against Christianophobia and Judeophobia.

Because the thing at stake is our shared humanity.

I know that this might sound naïve, but I believe that it's possible, and the only thing that is standing between us and a more tolerant world is fear. When the world changes, people start worrying about what the future holds. This fear makes people shrink themselves into the passive position of victims, rejecting reality, and looking for someone to blame for being behind all this. It is true today as much as it was true in 1948. The Arab world can overcome this mindset, but it requires the courage to think and act differently. This change demands that the Arabs realize that they are not helpless victims, it demands that they open up to self-criticism, and to holding themselves accountable.

Up to this day, not a single history book in the Arab world questions the historic mistake of rejecting the establishment of the Jewish state.

No prominent Arab academic has come out saying that if the Arabs would've accepted the idea of a Jewish state, there would've been two states, there would've been no war, and there would've been no refugees' problem.

I see Israelis like Benny Morris who is with us today, who dare to challenge the narratives of their leadership in Israel, taking personal risks in the quest of a truth that is not always comfortable for their people.

But I fail to find their Arab equivalents.

I fail to see a debate questioning the wisdom of the destructive leadership of the Mufti of Jerusalem

Hajj Amin al-Hussaini; or the unnecessary war launched by the Arab league in 1948, or any of the wars against Israel, in the years that followed until today;

And I fail to see self-criticism in the Palestinian mainstream today about the use of terrorism, the launching of the second intifada, or the rejection of at least two Israeli offers in the last 15 years to end the conflict.

Self-reflection is not a weakness; it is a sign of strength.

It brings forth our ability to overcome fear and face reality.

It demands us to look sincerely into our decisions, and take responsibility for it.

Only the Arabs themselves can change their reality.

By stopping the leaning on conspiracy theories and the blaming of outside powers – America, the Jews, the West or whoever – for all the problems;

By learning from past mistakes,

And by making wiser decisions in the future;

Just two days ago the U.S. President Obama stood at the U.N. podium in front of the General Assembly and said:

“The task of rejecting sectarianism and extremism is a generational task – a task for the people of the Middle East themselves. No external power can bring about a transformation of hearts and minds”.

Lately I’ve read a very interesting article by Lord Sacks about rivalry among brothers in the bible.

There are four stories about rival brothers in the book of Genesis: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers.

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Each story ends differently –

In the case of Cain and Abel, Abel lies dead.

In the case of Isaac and Ishmael, they are standing together at their father's grave.

In the case of Jacob and Esau, they meet, embrace and go their separate ways.

But the case of Joseph ends differently.

For those who are not familiar with the story: Joseph was the 11th of Jacob's 12 sons and Rachel's firstborn, in the land of Canaan. At some stage, because of their jealousy of him, his brothers decide to sell him to slavery. However, after a while Joseph rose to become the second most powerful man in Egypt next to Pharaoh. When famine struck Canaan, Joseph's father Jacob and Joseph's brothers came to Egypt. And there, instead of punishing them for what they have done to him, Joseph decides to forgive his brothers.

This was the first recorded event of forgiveness and reconciliation in literature.

Joseph provides his brothers with all their needs. They prosper, they grow in numbers, and they become a great nation. At the end of the story, Joseph says to his brothers "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

By that, he meant that by our acts in the present we can shape the future, and by that redeem the past.

Jews and Palestinians, we might not be brothers in faith, but we certainly are brothers in fate.

And I believe that just like in the story of Joseph, through making the right choices, by choosing to focus on the future, we can redeem our past.

Yesterday's enemies can be tomorrow's friends. It happened between Israel and Germany, Israel and Egypt, Israel and Jordan.

It is time to start in making a ray of hope in the relations between Israelis and Palestinians, so that

we can put an end to the replaying of old grievances, and focus on our future and the exciting possibilities it holds for us all, if we'd only dare.

I still didn't tell you the rest of my family's story in 1948.

After a long journey towards Lebanon, most of it by foot, my grandparents George and Vera reached Lebanon. They stayed there for many months. And while there, my grandmother gave birth to her first son, my uncle Sami. When the war was over, they realized that they had been lied to – The Arabs did not win the war, as promised. And at the same time, the Jews did not kill all the Arabs as they were told that would happen. My grandfather looked around him and saw nothing but a dead-end life as refugees. He looked at his young wife Vera – not even 18 yet, and his newborn son, and knew that in a place stuck in the past with no ability to look forward, there is no future for his family. While his brothers and sisters saw their future in Lebanon and other Arab and Western countries, he thought otherwise. He wanted to go back to Jaffa, his hometown. Because he worked with Jews in the past and was a friend to them, he was not brainwashed with hatred.

My grandfather George did what few others would have dared – he reached out to those that his community saw as their enemies. He got hold of one of his old friends from the electricity company, and asked for his help to get back. And that friend, of whom I've heard through my father's stories, and never knew his name, not only was able and willing to help my grandfather get back, but in an extraordinary act of grace, he even helped him gwt his old job back at what has become the Israeli electricity company, making him one the very few Arabs who work there.

Today, among my siblings and cousins we have accountants, teachers, insurance agents, Hi-tech engineers, diplomats, factory managers, university professors, doctors, lawyers, investment consultants, managers of top Israeli companies, architects and even electricians.

The reason that my family have succeeded in life, the reason that I'm standing here as an Israeli diplomat, and not as a Palestinian refugee from Lebanon – is because my grandfather had the courage to take a decision that was unthinkable to others. Rather than falling into despair, he found hope where no one dared to look for it; He chose to live among those who were considered his enemies, and to make them his friends; For that, I and my family owe him and my grandmother eternal gratitude.

The story of the Deek family should serve as a source of inspiration to the Palestinian people.

We cannot change the past.

But we can secure a future for our next generations, if we want to mend the past some day;

We can help the Palestinian refugees have a normal life;

We can be sincere about our past, and learn from our mistakes;

And we can unite – Muslims, Jews and Christians – to protect our right to be different, and by that preserve our humanity;

Indeed we can't change the past,

But if we do all that, we will change the future.

Thank you.

* Full transcript of a lecture by George Deek, Israel's vice ambassador to Norway. He gave this lecture in the House of Litterature in Oslo, during an event organised by "Med Israel for fred" ("With Israel for peace"), 27 September 2014. Deek himself is a Christian Arab from Jaffa.
"This is the best speech an Israeli diplomat ever held", was the reaction among several of the listeners. If you like to see and hear Deek giving this lecture, go here: http://youtu.be/8m6ux-IeNo4