

The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History

Edited by Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg., New York: Columbia University Press, 2018

Reviewed by Reem Ghanayem

Is it permissible to draw comparisons between the Holocaust and the Nakba as foundational events that alternately intersect and diverge in the historical, psychological and colonial contexts of the Jewish and Palestinian peoples? And if so, then what dangers are posed by such a comparison in its exploration of the hidden convergences between the two events?

For the Jews, the Holocaust was a matchless, cosmic, foundational event, any discussion of which together with any other event would be seen as posing a political and moral danger to its very historical reality. For the Arabs and Palestinians, the Nakba, is likewise viewed as a foundational historical event. Many Palestinians view the acknowledgment of the Holocaust as tantamount to legitimizing the atrocities of the Nakba and the injustices which Israel continues to inflict on them.

In this book, *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History*, Arab and Jewish thinkers put these two traumas in conversations with one another and explore the various factors that connect them without seeking to blur or disregard the fundamental differences between them. Edited jointly by a Palestinian (Bashir Bashir) and an Israeli (Amos Goldberg), this book relies on a structural and syntactical approach that strives to create a new alternative discourse which diverges from the dominant narrative framing these two events—the Holocaust and the Nakba. Rather than conceiving of them as

contradictory, oppositional entities, this new, alternative discourse construes them instead as relational concepts, as component parts of a meaningful historical statement, each of them helps to make sense of the other. The aim is not to highlight the “parity” between the Holocaust and the Nakba, which are historically distinct in terms of both their contexts and their outcomes. Rather, the task is to strive as Jacqueline Rose put it in this book, to narrate them as two moments, both of which form part of a single story, affirming the view that unless these two moments are discussed in relation to one another, then there can be no movement forward (p. 353).

The importance of this book lies in its presentation of the interconnectedness of the Palestinian Nakba in parallel with its Arab representation, and the Jewish Holocaust in parallel with its Israeli representation. In so doing, this book presents a new way of relating to “the Other.” In addition to Bashir and Goldberg’s lengthy Introduction, the book includes twelve chapters that examine the challenges related in any attempt to connect the Holocaust and the Nakba based on the issues raised by the two narratives, such as the culture of memory, victimhood, suffering, Palestinian asylum, and the ethics of narrating the past as a personal political history that are dissected and reconnected in order to understand the intersections between the Holocaust and the Nakba. The volume goes about uncovering these connections through a focus on three broad themes: the historical, the moral-political, and the cultural. Certain perspectives presented in the book focus on genocide (the Holocaust) and ethnic cleansing (the Nakba) (Notably by Alon Konfino). Others focus on the historical links between the two events with the aim of thinking about history and memory in a different way. the fourth part of the book (notably by Refka Abu Remaileh, Raef Zreik and Yehuda Shenhav), reflect on the migration of cultural and artistic symbols from discourse around one event to discourse around another.

Most of the contributors show that the historical, political and cultural intersections between these two tragedies are inseparable from cultural perceptions and asymmetrical colonial power relations. As such, the analyzing these intersections paves the way for new political, cultural and ethical rules that, it is hoped, will make it possible to establish a joint Arab-Jewish dialogue while supporting historical reconciliation in Israel/Palestine.

The importance of this book lies in its ability to pose a variety of communal, historical, social and psychological dialectics of relevance to two traumatic events without forcing the reader to adopt the opinions or positions of either the editors or the contributors, be they Arabs or Jews. However, once one has taken in this book's thesis, numerous questions arise, though: Can the current Israeli reality, steeped as it is now in rightwing thought on the levels of both the citizenry and the government, and based as it is on the notion of the Jewish identity of the State, be open to the notion of binationalism? How could this historical commonality help us to find a solution to, for example, the issue of the return of the Palestinian refugees—the thorniest of all the issues in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Particularly with the help of its comprehensive, detailed introduction, the book deals in a profound and highly sensitive manner with the concepts of history and memory. However, it disconnects itself from the current moment of reality in a “gamble” that might lead us onto either of two distinct paths. The first path opens the door to an opportunity for dialogue and acknowledgment on the part of both Arabs and Jews based on a mutual process of rethinking their respective pivotal events. In so doing, this book may have laid a foundation for a future dialogue with the potential of changing the political course of Israelis and Palestinians. On the other path, by contrast, the notion of a joint or mutual rethinking of historical events is so impacted by the current political reality in Israel, and in the Middle East generally, that rather than changing the political

situation via this notion by transcending of the reality of memory, the notion of mutuality is essentially held hostage by politics.

Therefore, this attempt at reconciliation or dialogue through rethinking constitutes a major gamble which might, or might not, answer the question posed in this article concerning the legitimacy of viewing the Holocaust and the Nakba as shared foundations of a sort, and concerning the extent to which such a foundation can help to bring about genuine, radical change in concrete terms. There are other issues and questions that might also be raised by a discussion of the book's thesis. One of these revolves around Palestinians' relationship to their Nakba, bearing in mind that the Palestinians' identity has been formed on 'earthly' foundations (their relationship to the land on which they live), and the impact of the Nakba on Palestinians' current reality and their way of defining themselves and their cause, which they view as one of human rights first and foremost. Similarly, there is the question concerning the relationship of the Jews, whose identity has been shaped on "heavenly" foundations, to the Holocaust, and how this has impacted their definition of themselves and their perception of themselves as an occupying power which is choking the life out of an entire people.

We return, then, to the question: How capable is the book's thesis of impacting current political reality and people's awareness of the need for change? Whatever answer to this question emerges, there is certainly a need to follow this book with other studies of equal seriousness, both Arab and Jewish, Palestinian and Israeli, which complement its descriptions of the debates that continue to rage around the psychological, social, political and historical realities of Israelis and Palestinians.