

## **National narrative under scholarly analysis**

### **Palestine in Israeli School Books**

#### **Ideology and Propaganda in Education**

**By Nurit Peled-Elhanan**

***“Hey, guess what, young Israeli soldiers are wearing cameras on their helmets as they search Arab houses looking for terrorists.”  
“Really?” “Yeah, its great, you should see the pictures”. “Wow, that’s cool”.***

I paraphrase an overheard conversation between American visitors in a restaurant in Jaffa. It came to mind as I began to read this book. Remember that old American saying derived from General Sheridan as he suppressed the indigenous people in favour of settlers, ‘The only good Indian is a dead Indian’? Once it is believed that Indians are savage, inferior, uncivilised and a hindrance to the fulfilment of those with God (and a specially designed historical narrative) on their side it becomes much easier to pull the trigger when you have them in your sights.

The proficiency in linguistics of Nurit Peled-Elhanan enables her to make points of historical, political, national, cultural and personal significance: points that engage our emotions: points that disturbingly, for some, challenge the many myths sustaining a system that dehumanises even the believers of those myths. To pull those triggers is dehumanising. To read, learn and inwardly digest this book just might rehumanise some of the people with fingers on triggers.

I wonder; to how many Israeli university undergraduate booklists will this book be added? Will it be studied by trainee teachers? Knowing and having worked with some Israeli teacher trainers I have hopes that it will. The power to approve school textbooks does not, however, lie with them and despite attempts by a valiant number of Israeli academics and journalists to draw attention to the role of ideology and propaganda in education the official narrative continues to be deeply internalised.

Some of the labels that we use in order to classify ‘others’ and to signpost the histories that keep us comfortable with ourselves can be misleading, even wrong, but also very sticky. Like the UK Israel has many sustaining myths that come with some very sticky labels. I doubt if there remains a serious historian who believes that the Romans expelled the Jews from Palestine after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem or the later Bar Kokhba Revolt and yet the notion of ‘returning’ after expulsion is an embedded belief-a sticky label- that helps legitimise the establishment of the state in a form that raises one group above another. And this is a state that, while reducing the status of the people it found there, has managed to promote the idea that it is ‘The only democracy in

the Middle East'. Can you be a democracy and yet raise one group of citizens above another? And, you might ask, how can a country claim for itself the power to charge its critics with being anti-Semitic when it pursues policies that humiliate and demonise 'others' who are at least as Semitic?

You know that you have been labelled as inferior when you are forced to accept being re-named and re-classified by a more powerful invading group: when your capacity to self-define is lost to others. For example, to be labelled Welsh is to accept being called 'foreigner' in the Germanic language of the invaders of Britain. It is insulting but eventually you accept it because you lack the power to resist the new narrative. 'Israeli Arabs', however, whenever they cross over the border, refer to themselves as Palestinians. They have not accepted their re-classification. Nurit's analysis of the discourse within Israeli (Jewish) schoolbooks makes clear that not only do two contradictory realities exist but that the internalisation of the official Israeli narrative is so crucial for self legitimacy that it must squeeze out, suppress and subdue historical narratives that contradict it.

Nurit's book reveals how Palestinians are represented negatively within the Israeli national narrative, specifically in school textbooks. The high quality of her scholarship, including the amount of carefully detailed evidence she provides, will make it difficult for propagators of the official narrative to attack and contradict her. So, we should ask, what might be the effect of this book?

The Israeli historian Shlomo Sand's book *The invention of the Jewish people* (2009) generated very strong pro and con reactions and, incidentally, huge sales in Israel. His intention to normalise or to de-exceptionalise being Jewish in Israel was probably weakened because in straying from his area of expertise he enabled those he had upset to pick holes in part of his thesis. Nurit does not stray from her area of expertise. She uses it on a specific topic: a topic that might be thought to be small and narrow but that actually unlocks matters of huge significance. In discussing Israel as a democracy she introduces us to the word 'ethnocracy'. School textbooks reinforce the idea that Israel is an ethnically based state: a state for Jews: a racially ring-fenced democracy. I have often wondered how schoolteachers taking classes round the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv deal with the display just inside the entrance that makes the contrary point that Jews are racially disparate. There is plenty to argue and become upset about.

What she has to say about the rationalising, even the justifying, of massacres carried out by Israeli forces reminds me of yet another conversation, this one between me and a strong supporter of the official narrative. We were arguing about the Dier Yassin massacre in 1948 when most of the inhabitants of a Palestinian village were killed. My interlocutor:

***"It is emerging now that they were warned to get out so why did they stay to be killed?"***

This was presented to me as a debate winning argument. It was, in other words, their own fault that they were killed. As Nurit explains in the book, it is not a case

of hiding history but, rather, a case of setting examples of such massacres within a discourse of what had to happen in order to establish a state for exceptionalised people.

Visiting Yad Veshem, the holocaust museum, I found to be a deeply emotional experience. American money has since paid for its expansion. Foreign dignitaries are taken there. Its impact upon them must be very powerful. I bet that Tony Blair has been. He is, after all, charged with bringing peace to the area, though he has never visited Gaza. During these visits does anyone have pointed out to them by their guides that this museum, which remembers an appalling crime against humanity, which humbles us, which reduces visitors to tongue-tied silence, which commits us to dedicate our lives to never, ever, ever allowing anything like that to happen again, is built on a pleasant shallow hillside overlooking what was once Dier Yassin?

Why should any of this matter to us? Is it not merely “a quarrel in a far away country between people about whom we know nothing”, as Chamberlain said about the German invasion of Czechoslovakia? It matters because “education, education, education” is really about “society, society, society”. Let us not fall into the trap of assuming that Israel is exceptional in its portrayal of and teaching about ‘others’. ‘British’ history is mostly ‘English’ history. The histories of, for example, the USA, Argentina, Brazil, Tibet or Australia are not taught to children from the perspectives of indigenous, invaded peoples. To do that would be discomfoting. We are suckers for reassuring narratives. They absolve us from sin. Remember the profound words of that archenemy of the working classes, Winston Churchill: “History shall be kind to me, for I shall write it”.

The book also matters to us because we collaborate with the distorters of history in an area that we have chosen to make special. The ‘Holy Land’ is not merely a tourist destination. We imbue it with so much meaning that the shape, nature, focus and intent of its discourse have the power to control how we make sense of humanity.

Do buy, read, disseminate and argue about this book: a book to which I have done scant justice. I have used the word ‘exceptional’ a number of times. I wish I could say that Nurit Peled-Elhanan is not exceptional. Unfortunately, she is. I met her briefly when she did some work on a programme that I directed in Israel working with teachers across cultural, religious, ethnic and political boundaries. She is a co-recipient of the 2001 Sakharov Prize for Human Rights and the Freedom of Thought awarded by the European Parliament. I knew before I met her that her daughter had recently been killed by a suicide bomber. What I did not then know was the huge extent of her intellectual capacity to focus upon and reveal the power of official discourse and narrative to create the conditions for killing. After reading this book no one should think that discourse analysis is only for ivory tower academics. It has the potential to relax a few trigger fingers.

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