

Opinion | It's Not Only the Gaza Strip That Needs Rebuilding – So Does the Israeli Ethos

Michael Sfar Mar 31, 2024 12:11 am IDT [Follow](#)

The images of the Gaza Strip in ruins are colorless. There are only shades of grey, a mess of demolished, uprooted, bombed-out and pulverized concrete.

The only images of Gaza in ruins that the Israeli media dares to publish, taken by drones or by teams of photographers who entered the Strip embedded with the army, show no people. No crying orphaned children, no women desperately looking for wild herbs to eat that may have sprouted where there was once asphalt, no elderly people doomed to spend their last years in unimaginable suffering, in abject poverty. The images reflected to us from Gaza bring to mind Dresden, Warsaw and the site of the World Trade Center after the 9/11 terror attack: the same aesthetics of utter ruin, of doomsday.

Zionism, like all national movements, is predicated on myth, pathos and ethos. Zionism has many myths, the most significant of which is the lie of "land without people to a people without a land." The double myth of exile and a continuous yearning for a Jewish return, and of an empty land lying in waste awaiting its owners, informs the Zionist move of a refugee people that has turned (and continues to turn) another people into refugees.

The myths of the exodus and of the Maccabees, of Purim and of Masada – these are all part of the greater myth that tells Israeli Jews the story of their existence in this land. This is a narrative fabric that assigns the entire world genocidal intentions against Jews, everywhere and at all times. ("In every generation some have arose against us to exterminate us," tells us the Passover Haggadah.)

The insights gleaned from the Israeli myth require force and ruthless Jewish muscle. "If someone comes to kill you, rise early and kill him first." Zionist pathos tightens the myth, recruiting the public to make sacrifices, instills suspicion and shrinks the spectrum of possibilities into a binary choice: Kill them or be killed ourselves.

A classic example for this is Moshe Dayan's eulogy (itself of mythic status) for Ro'i Rothberg, who was murdered near Nahal Oz in 1956: "Millions of Jews, exterminated with no land of their own, are looking at us from the ashes of Israeli history and command us to settle and to give rise to a land for our people," said Dayan. "But beyond the border furrow, the sea of hatred and of vengefulness rises, looking forward to the day when peacefulness dims our readiness, to the day when we listen to the emissaries of malevolent hypocrisy, calling on us to lay down our weapons."

Zionist myth and pathos follow in the footsteps of the biblical prophet Balaam's melancholy description of the Israelites, "the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations," dictating for us, Israeli Jews, a nationalistic, militaristic and ethnocentric agenda.

In contrast, Zionist ethos – the set of values and the worldview to which Israeli society pledges allegiance – purports to encompass within it a complexity of values. Jewish, but also "democratic." Military might, but also "purity of arms." An independent sovereignty that brooks no outside dictations, but is also "faithful to the principles of the United Nations Charter" (as announced in the Declaration of Independence).

And, of course, it strives for peace. It strives so much that striving for peace is our middle name. I could write 10 hefty volumes describing the huge gaps between Israeli ethos and reality, but as long as the ethos is there and society swears by it, its moral power is at work, and even if it doesn't carry

the day, it still serves as a counterweight to the vector dictated by the myth and the pathos.

The Netanyahu era will be judged by history to be the era when every last component of the Israeli ethos was pulverized. First, the administrative and political values: moral integrity, the independence of the judiciary, freedom of speech, the compliance of those in power with the rule of law – all these were shredded in the offices of the prime minister and the chairman of the Knesset. You will no longer hear Benjamin Netanyahu and his minions speak on behalf of these values.

Secondly, the purity of arms. I may have missed something, but it seems to me it's been a long time since I last heard the phrase "the most moral army in the world." Even the Israel Defense Forces' greatest fans find it hard to repeat this mantra with a straight face these days.

A society that destroys cities, towns and villages, killing 32,000 people (so far), most of them civilians, is up to its neck in genocidal incitement with no response from law enforcement authorities, is turning 1.5 million people into destitute refugees, trades (openly!) in their hunger and makes do with a command reprimand to an officer who, on his own decision, blew up a university – such a society no longer purports to adhere to a notion of "purity of arms."

Under the cover of justifiable pain and rage over Hamas' horrifying and unforgivable crimes, the right wing has managed to bring in an alternative ethos: "might is right."

But perhaps the most blatant instance of the pulverization of the last remains of Israeli ethos is the treatment accorded by the Israeli government and its supporters to the hostages and their families.

It's hard to think of a more basic or sacred principle for a society than its responsibility for its own people in distress.

We all grew up with the (twisted and exaggerated, naturally) claim that "a man falls down in the street abroad and nobody goes to him, while in Israel the whole neighborhood will come to help him."

Mutual solidarity is always important, but is doubly and triply so when the distress was brought upon the citizens due to a terrible governmental failure, the result of an inconceivable abandonment by those responsible for their protection. So what could be more beneficial to social cohesiveness than the redemption of the hostages? The dismantling of this value is an untying of the last thread that pulls individuals together into a society.

There may well be situations when hostages cannot be redeemed, and there may be cases when the price demanded for their release creates a real dilemma. But in our case, the price isn't the story, it is the alibi Netanyahu hides behind, abusing it to delay a deal that is very likely to break apart his governing coalition.

And this alibi is blown apart by the criminal treatment of hostages' families by the government and its supporters, who have been inciting against them, threatening them not to be too critical of the prime minister, viewing them as a nuisance and branding them as a group with outside interests beyond their eminently justifiable demand for the immediate return of their dear ones.

In Basel, Switzerland, Theodor Herzl founded the Jewish state, and in Tel Aviv's slowly emptying Hostage Square it is rapidly losing its last declared value.

So the look of Gaza in ruins is not merely a documentation of the reality in the Strip – it is also an adequate representation of the State of Israel's ethos, a terrifying MRI imaging of our idealistic soul. It's not only Gaza that needs rebuilding – so does the Israeli ethos. It will take many years to reconstruct them both.

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