

Edward Said: A Tribute

ILAN PAPPE

I belong to a very particular and limited group of people in Israel. We are Israeli Jews who have been full-heartedly supporting the Palestinian cause. Some of us had done it from very early on, others only lately. For veterans and novices, alike this position of ours has alienated us from our own society and sometimes even from our own family. In their eyes our stance verges on the border of insanity at best, and treason at worst. We have been there not because we have become Palestinian nationalists, but because we had a painful awakening to the history and essence of Zionism.

We marched on a hazardous and slippery road, undergoing an experience not that different from any liberation process addicts need to endure when getting rid of any spiritual or physical intoxication. What you need most in such a journey is a solid anchor; something or someone you can rely on to understand where you came from and where you are going to. In more concrete terms we needed a clear articulation of an agenda that would suit our preference for universal human rights issues and our rejection of the set of ideals that accompanied us from cradle; ideas that were deeply rooted in colonialism and nationalist fanaticism.

This is where Edward Said appeared in our life like a lighthouse navigating us out of the murkiness and confusion of growing up in a Zionist state onto a safer coast of reason, morality and consciousness. His untimely death left us in the darkness without his assured guidance and sense of direction, which we got accustomed to as years went by.

I am sorry I only met Edward in 1988, but I feel fortunate for the time we did spend together. His insights of, and inputs on, the global reality in general and the Palestinian one in particular will linger on, long after his death, and remain as they were at the time they were written, a relevant philosophical, political, and moral compass in the obfuscated world we live in.

But above all, I shall miss Edward's unique ability of articulating in the public sphere the essence of the Palestine question. *The Palestine Question* was his first ever work to be published in Hebrew and it was the first of his books I ever read. The spirit of the book, no less than its factual basis, accompanied me while I was mining the archives—revisiting the history of 1948. Said's

perspective coupled, with the clear historiographical picture that emerged from the documents, introduced me to the evil inflicted upon the Palestinians in the 1948 war. Soon after I became acquainted with his other short and long attempts to analyze and present this past evil in much wider perspective. Said's particular strength was juxtaposing the *Nakbab* and its horrors against its denial in the West. Said in more than one book and work exposed the Western media's effort of sidelining in, if not altogether eliminating from, the public mind the plight and tragedy of Palestine. There is no one who could easily fill his place on the various public stages in which he so convincingly represented the case of Palestine. It would be very difficult to follow in his footsteps and be able to associate so lucidly the wrongs of the past with the tragedy of the present in the land of Palestine.

Said was not an historian by inclination or profession. But he injected into the historiographical debate his original thoughts about issues such as representation, power relations and the production of knowledge—all very relevant issues to the writing of history. If and when you read Said's general thoughts about these topics, you could immediately connect this critique to the role of historiography in the Palestine conflict. Said held the keys to the riddle for the long and overdue hegemony of the Zionist narrative in the public and academic space. The historical version of a people without land arriving at the end of the nineteenth century in a people-less country, modernizing it and blooming its deserts, while fighting for its life against unexplained barbaric attacks by its Islamic and Arab neighbors dominated the academic discourse in the West. Writing differently and more truthfully about what happened, according to Said, was not just a more professional historiography; it was also a political act of redemption and justice. Under the influence of his work, the balance was redressed and the Palestinian narrative, once regarded as sheer propaganda in the West while the Israeli one was respected as academic and serious, was legitimized while the Zionist one exposed for its falsity and pretense.

No less important was the way Said related directly to the historian's workshop when he discussed the meaning and significance of the "historical document." When

moderating a meeting between Israeli and Palestinian historians in Paris in 1998, Said explained in few sentences, and in a very patient voice, to the attentive public at large, and to the less attentive Israeli historians in particular, what a “historical document” was. The Israeli historians expressed their almost religious belief that they were both ideologically and empirically just and declared that the only reliable sources for the reconstruction of the 1948 war were in the IDF archives and its documents. Said clarified that a report by a soldier from 1948 is as much an interpretation, and quite often manipulation, of the reality as is any other human recollection of the same event; it was never the reality itself. By this, he pointed us to the vitality and significance of oral history in the reconstruction of the past. The most horrific aspects of the *Nakbah*—the dozens of massacres that accompanied the ethnic cleansing—as well as a detailed description of what expulsion had been from the expelled’s point of view, can only be built when such a historiographical position is adopted.

At that meeting, Edward was at his best, mainly because he was able to articulate what others felt, but were unable to express in a meaningful manner. He wondered aloud how anyone could relate to the *Nakbah*’s real essence—as the most traumatic catastrophe that befell the Palestinian people—without showing even a modicum of solidarity with or sympathy for its victims. As he noted, the Israeli historians would have never tolerated such a treatment of Holocaust history.

Said’s long engagement with Palestine’s history and historiography had a very clear, constructive agenda in its background. He saw a mutual recognition of the Palestinian suffering and the Jewish one, as a precondition for reconciliation. He wished Palestinians and Arabs to desist denying or dwarfing the Jewish Holocaust and hoped that this would encourage Israeli Jews to cease their *Nakbah* denial and lead them to acknowledge the past evils they had inflicted on the Palestinians. Until his last days, he remained a great believer of History not as concept that enslaves the present, but one that liberates it, for a sake of a better future.

As Said himself, so this tribute has to move back and forth from his life involvement in the Palestine issue into his incredible presence in the more general debates on culture and power. Therefore, in any retrospective review of Said’s personal and intellectual biography, we should keep on moving on the two Saidian paths—the Palestinian and the general one—that fed each other in his lifetime and work. So while we commemorate his invaluable contribution to the historiography of modern Palestine in general, and the *Nakbah* in particular, we should recognize that the academic and intellectual world would equally be disorientated without his original thoughts on, and conceptualizations of, broader issues that lie at the heart of the global cultural debate and

agenda.

Said founded a school of thought and composed a whole area of studies—this is a mark of his greatness as well as a source of hope that in the future his ideas will remain with us for a very long time. The postcolonial deliberations he began in the 1970s, as well as his 1980s formulations of cultural studies, are now part and parcel of any serious academic center in the world. Their protracted and expanded presence are a testimony to his extraordinary contribution to our intellectual life. When he published his seminal work, *Orientalism*, nobody could predict the earthquake he would cause in the academic Western world. With a stroke of a pen he effectively deconstructed the power bases behind the Orientalist enterprise and exposed the more sinister interests behind knowledge production in the West on Middle Eastern history and culture. Had he been listened to in the American corridors of power—where his advice was ignored—it may have been possible back in the 1970s to place the U.S. policy towards the Islamic and Middle Eastern world on a more sensible and fruitful track. But Washington was listening to the pro-Israeli Orientalists, who are now, after the Bush takeover, back in fashion and at the center, with dire consequences for the U.S. and the Arab World.

For those of us who knew him more personally, we have all lost a dear and genuine friend, with whom one could talk about the most abstract philosophical issues and with the same ease move to more mundane problems in life—which usually paled in comparison with his endless and brave struggle against his fateful illness.

Something of this mixture and balance was also present in his books. He will be remembered, and justly so, for *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*—twin works that shaped and nourished the invigorating field of Postcolonial and Cultural Studies. But I will also always cherish his *Politics of Dispossession*—short and lucid interventions, quite often immediate reactions to a recent crisis or juncture in the life of Palestine and the Palestinians, but always contextualizing a given event and his thoughts on it, within the much broader view of the march of history. His ability to move from a clear sighted political essay on the Palestine question onto a theoretical insight on the interpretation of culture, while musing on his love of music and agonizing on his less pleasant chapters in life, was beautifully demonstrated in his memoirs *Out of Place*. This book is a rare historical document on an era in the Eastern Mediterranean gone for ever, but so vividly alive in Said’s autobiography.

Towards the end of the summer of 2003, I had my last meaningful conversation—on the phone—with Edward. He beseeched me in a broken voice, as he did others I am sure, not to give up the struggle for relocating the Palestinians’ refugee issue at the heart of public and global agendas. He stressed the need to con-

tinue the effort to change the American public opinion on Palestine, and he was very hopeful and encouraged by what he recognized as significant change in European public opinion.

I now realize this was a will, one of the many spiritual and moral ones he left to many of us. In his memory and out of respect to his intellectual genius as well as to his moral courage, Palestinians, and those committed to the cause of Palestine, should regroup their energies and reorganize their efforts to impress on the world that there will be no justice and no peace in Palestine, no stability in the Middle East and no tranquility in the U.S. relationship with the Muslim world, without the return of Palestinian refugees to their home, the end of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the building of a state in Palestine that would respect human and civil rights, as did Edward all his life.