

An  
Israeli  
In  
Palestine

*Resisting Dispossession,  
Redeeming Israel*

JEFF HALPER



# Contents

Illustrations and Maps	vii
Introduction: Getting It and Going There	1
PART I: COMPREHENDING OPPRESSION	
1. The Making of a Critical Israeli	15
2. The Message of the Bulldozers	36
PART II: THE SOURCES OF OPPRESSION	
3. The Impossible Dream: Constructing a Jewish Ethnocracy in Palestine	63
4. Dispossession ( <i>Nishul</i> ): Ethnocracy's Handmaiden	97
5. The Narrative of <i>Exodus</i>	126
PART III: THE STRUCTURE OF OPPRESSION	
6. Expanding Dispossession: The Occupation and the Matrix of Control	141
7. Concluding Dispossession: Oslo and Unilateral Separation	175
PART IV: OVERCOMING OPPRESSION	
8. Redeeming Israel	207
9. What About Terrorism?	234
10. Where Do We Go From Here?	254

**Appendices**

Appendix 1: House Demolitions in the Occupied Territories Since 1967	275
Appendix 2: The Road Map and Israel's 14 Reservations	278
Appendix 3: Letter from US President George W. Bush to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon	286
Appendix 4: The Case for Sanctions Against Israel: ICAHAD's Position on Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions	289
Bibliography	294
Further Resources	304
Index	305

# *Introduction: Getting It and Going There*

One way of looking at the history of the human group is that it has been a continuing struggle against the veneration of “crap”. Our intellectual history is a chronicle of the anguish and suffering of men who tried to help their contemporaries see that some part of their fondest beliefs were misconceptions, faulty assumptions, superstitions and even outright lies. We have in mind a new education that would set out to cultivate just such people—experts at “crap detecting”...We are talking about the schools cultivating in the young that most “subversive” intellectual instrument—the anthropological perspective. This perspective allows one to be part of his own culture and, at the same time, to be out of it.

—Neil Postman and Charles Weingarten,  
*Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969)

When I began my career as an educator almost 40 years ago, I shared the simple, commonsensical and optimistic assumption of my fellow educators that people, when given sufficient information, will “learn.” Indeed, education is based on the fundamental principle that if people are provided with the rudimentary tools of understanding—facts, context, concepts and an ability to figure things out for themselves—they can and will change their opinions and behavior. This does not mean they must easily give up the views and values they have been given by their society or which they have adopted themselves. It does mean, however, that they are capable of adapting their worldviews in light of issues or situations they might not have fully understood originally. Equally important—and this is the essence of learning—they are capable of modifying their worldviews even if the issues or situations at hand lead them

to conclusions contrary to what they have hitherto accepted as “right.” As an anthropologist, an educator and a political activist, I still cling to that naïve idea. I am incapable of surrendering the belief that people are basically good and rational, the problem being that their deeply-held cultural identities, narratives, norms, experiences and interests often put them on a collision course with other equally good people whose own worldviews, practices and politics are diametrically opposed. It is this fundamental tension between the ability to learn and change, on the one hand, and, on the other, the fact that people are defined by the social and cultural templates they internalize and fiercely defend, that prevents us from transcending our ethnocentrism and finding ways to deal fairly with those we define as our “enemies.”

This tension explodes into full-blown xenophobia when we add other elements characteristic of our global village. Rapid technological and political change keeps us in a constant state of confusion, tension and defensivity as the very values, views and lifestyles we grew up with are thrown into question. “Future-shock” as Alvin Toffler called it. Conflict rises, but a new and more threatening type of conflict, not traditional wars between ideological enemies but seeming “clashes of civilizations.” Given, however, the unsustainable lifestyle of ours, the privileged portion of humanity, civilizational “clashes” are but a self-serving way of concealing a brutal reality: that in order to maintain our lifestyles we must control the increasingly scarce resources found, for the most part, in lands of marginalized peoples. Our standard of living depends upon domination and oppression. “How did our oil get under their sand?” as the American bumper-sticker has it. No wonder the defensive mechanisms go up and the good and privileged ones—everyone reading this book—stop listening and circle the wagons.

This is always disappointing to educators, but it does not contradict our conviction that rationality will eventually

prevail if people have genuine opportunities to understand and act. Contrary to popular views, this is something permitted by all cultures, all of whom contain both conservative and liberal elements. When cultures close down and appear to become xenophobic or oppressive, it is invariably because of adverse external circumstances rather than anything deriving from the culture itself. The problem of good, intelligent, rational people tolerating and even supporting oppression, intolerance, chauvinism and conflict has, therefore, little to do with “human nature” or “clashes of civilizations.” It arises, instead, because people are disempowered by their society’s power elite and their cronies, “opinion-makers.” Parents, teachers, political and community leaders, clergy, celebrities and the media—all play their role in confining us to the “box,” a narrow set of behaviors and opinions that define us as “normal.” Since boxes can be confining and supremely boring, the most effective way of keeping us in them is, as the American educator John Taylor Gatto has persuasively argued, to “dumb them down.” Assigned to teach “average” kids from whom nothing in particular was expected, Gatto (1992:xi–xii) noticed over the years that

the unlikeliest kids kept demonstrating to me at random moments so many of the hallmarks of human excellence—insight, wisdom, justice, resourcefulness, courage, originality—that I became confused. They...did it often enough that I began to wonder, reluctantly, whether it was possible that being in school itself was what was dumbing them down. Was it possible I had been hired not to enlarge children’s power, but to diminish it?

The great task of any educator, therefore, is to break people out of The Box, to enable them to transcend the confines imposed upon them and to re-link their innate capacity to understand with those elements of their cultures that allow them to reach out rather than close in. This is not an easy task. Liberating ourselves from The Box means bucking those very “gatekeepers”—gatekeepers who possess significant power and

sanctions—who constructed it and who work so diligently to keep us inside. If holes can be punched in The Box most people will do what comes naturally: they will peek outside. Now the powers-that-be know this, and so to prevent people from looking out, they demonize the hole-punchers. When critical individuals found in every culture succeed, then, in opening a new window on “reality,” the very act has already been so discredited that the gatekeepers often need do nothing; the “average people” themselves quickly paper it over.

Now the modern media—newspapers, television, radio, the internet, satellite dishes, cell phones, mass transportation, plus libraries and so much more—have themselves punched holes in The Box; they have even given people in liberal societies the impression that there *is* no box. Dumbing down, then, has another function: preventing people from “getting it” even if they do manage to glimpse a world outside The Box. “I began to realize,” writes Gatto (1992:xii), “that the bells and the confinement, the crazy sequences, the age-segregation, the lack of privacy, the constant surveillance, and all the rest... were designed exactly as if someone had set out to *prevent* children from learning how to think and act, to coax them into addiction and dependent behavior.” Although some people “get it” without any outside intervention, it usually requires the development of critical thinking, something the gatekeepers in every society and culture oppose. Only limited forms of critical thinking are tolerated, mainly in the rarified worlds of art and literature, but in general critical thinkers are considered subversive. What exactly are those “critical” elements of thinking that, without them, we can’t really “get it”? Among others, they include control over one’s thinking processes, enabling one to detect elements of irrationality, prejudice, fear, peer pressure and social conditioning; an intellectual readiness to consider new ideas and ways of doing things; a problem-posing rather than formulaic approach to the world, fostering problem-solving skills; and an ability to contextualize oneself.

Experience in other cultures also helps, since it nurtures an ability to see things from multiple perspectives. In the end, because of their exposure to the world and their ease with other points of view, critical thinkers tend to have a heightened sense of social responsibility and an ability to criticize their own societies.

Why am I getting into all this? Because it is crucial for peace-making. Our problem in Israel-Palestine is not how to make peace—there are a number of viable solutions and an overwhelming will for peace is present among both the Israeli and Palestinian publics—but how to overcome the fear and obfuscation by which Israel's gatekeepers deflect all attempts to arrive at a just peace, manipulating the thought and feelings of peoples and governments that don't, or won't, "get it." Because of both the emotionalism involved and the "clash of civilizations" framing, the struggle to articulate an approach to the conflict that will lead towards its resolution rather than blind support for one "side" over the other is virtually impossible. Effective peace-making requires that uncritical "support" for Israel, one expression of gatekeeper-controlled thought, be replaced by a more nuanced, critical approach to this complex issue, one that encompasses both "sides." I don't ask you to take "sides"; in fact, a chief claim of this book is that there *are* no sides. My job is to generate critical political discussion and effective action that will help us all—Israelis, Palestinians, peoples of the wider Arab and Muslim world and, indeed, people everywhere affected by this conflict—get out of this mess we share and suffer from.

If, on the way, engaging in this conflict nurtures critical thinking, that is only for the good. But this is not a course in critical thinking. How, then, do you move people willing at least to think out of The Box but lacking the knowledge and the skills to do so? One method employed in this book is reframing. If I can offer an alternative way of looking at the conflict, one which opens possibilities for resolution foreclosed



by Israel's "security" framing, I can empower the reader to critically reframe other issues that apply to other peoples and places as well. My task is to problematize, to break down the accepted categories and terms that block fresh, constructive, approaches to peace, and then to reframe the conflict in a way that offers new ways of thinking, new possibilities of resolution. The very title of this book, *An Israeli in Palestine*, highlights the holistic, out-of-The-Box, fluid, contradictory reality in which we all live, and nowhere more so than in the Middle East. The phrase *An Israeli in Palestine* makes sense and is useful only if we break down the seemingly self-evident us-and-them dichotomy that typifies ossified political discussion in and about Israel-Palestine, as elsewhere.

There is one other important element in my approach: Going there. I am, after all, an activist. I like to call myself an *engaged* anthropologist, one who combines his personal, professional and political lives. Acquiring a critical consciousness, being able to think "out of The Box," is a crucial first step. But what good is it unless one actually *steps out* of The Box. Only by bringing coherency and justice to that liminal space between the Boxes can Boxes themselves be eliminated and a truly global reality, a *good* reality within which cultural differences flourish without defensivity and conflict, be forged. This is the job of us, the people, not of the gatekeepers who jealously (and violently) guard the Boxes and keep us imprisoned. This is a book with a clear, empowering message: if we, the people, lead, our governments will follow. But we have to empower ourselves.

#### ISRAEL/PALESTINE: THE TEST-CASE

This book, then, has several agendas and can be read on several levels (and, again, I hope it will be of value to readers who are not Middle East "wonks"). At its most basic level, this book seeks to present a more critical view of the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict than is often offered. It is based upon what we anthropologists call “grounded analysis,” an intimate knowledge of the local landscape—the physical landscape of Palestine under occupation as well as the political landscape of Israel—where I have lived as an Israeli citizen for the past 35 years. It also incorporates, as I have been trained to do, relevant academic research and concepts.

But since I am interested not only in enlightening but also in galvanizing to action, this book has a point of view as well. It *advocates* for a just, win–win peace in which the concerns and needs of *all* the parties are addressed, the only approach I can see to a genuine solution to this century-long conflict. It also advocates for human rights. The world today is at an intersection. Either we continue along the well-worn path of power, militarism, realpolitik and domination that has led us to our sorry state, or we will begin forging a new one of inclusion, equality, human rights, international law, justice, peace and development. Which way we will go will be determined in large part by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is undoubtedly the most documented and transparent conflict in history, with the possible exception of the current war in Iraq. If Israel can continue as a respected member of the international community and yet maintain a violent occupation for 40 years and more that denied another people its fundamental rights, then what can be said for accountability to norms of human rights? And if accountability is removed as an international mechanism, we condemn ourselves to the unrestrained reign of power politics, with all the injustice and inequality that implies. The failure of the international community to bring this most transparent of conflicts to a just conclusion renders hollow all those values embodied in human rights. In addition to its power to destabilize the international system, this concern is what elevates the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a local to a global one, with enormous stakes for all of us.