

Daniel Bar-Tal

"Love your neighbor as yourself". This is the core requirement for overcoming blindness caused by hate and fear needed for peacemaking

Documentation of an open letter by Prof. Daniel Bar-Tal, Tel Aviv University (Israel)

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Dear Friends,

I write this letter with great concern for the future of my society and the State of Israel with the belief that the views presented here reflect the opinions of at least several hundred-thousand Jews living in Israel, who oppose the positions and the policies of the Israeli government and believe that these positions and policies are leading the country to disaster. This letter expresses my deep worry and conviction that Israel needs to be saved from the road chosen by the majority. Just because views are possessed by a majority does not mean that these views—and the actions that result from them— are right, moral or just. Thus all those who share the beliefs expressed in this letter are asked not to be bystanders to the upcoming and inevitable tragedy. No nation deserves this fate, even if its people are suffering from shortsightedness.

Recent events demonstrate how difficult it is to bring peace to this conflict-ridden region, but it is important to keep in mind that failure of the peace process may have disastrous consequences on both sides involved. The method of blaming for this failure reflects the same divisions that we have witnessed throughout the last decade: the Israeli government puts all the blame on the Palestinians without taking even a grain of responsibility, and the Palestinian Authority presents the exact opposite picture. Yet voices are appearing from participants in the negotiations who describe a much more complex story and Martyn Indyk revealed the destructive effect of the increased Jewish settlement activity during the negotiations as the major reason for their collapse. But one thing is already clear: the failure and its surrounding developments should be considered a major historical event and another turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both sides have lost their last ounces of trust in one another as a partner towards a possible peace agreement. Consequently the absence of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict coupled with the continuation of the lasting occupation is existentially detrimental to Israeli Jews and to Palestinians. Israeli Jews, who already practice **occupartheid** (defined as discrimination between populations on the basis of ethnic origin as a result of a lasting occupation that denies political and economic rights from the occupied population) will not be able to maintain this system forever and will eventually face a dilemma in which they will have to choose between two very different options: to be a democracy with a clear Jewish majority or to be a pariah, isolated state enacting formally a type of apartheid. Moreover, the lasting occupation, with its clear ethnic discrimination, has serious, injurious effects on the Israeli state and society that will be difficult to mend. If it will not terminate the cancerous occupation with the continuing process of "Judeizing" of the West Bank, Israel will be condemned to degeneration and isolation, with the possibility of renewed violence. And if the present situation persists, Palestinians are destined for an extended period of suffering and misery due to the continuation of the Israeli occupation as well as societal and economic disintegration. Both sides pay and will continue to pay very severe costs for the inability to genuinely embark on the road to peace-making. By choosing to continue the conflict, both sides are abandoning the golden way to benefitting both societies, which have never experienced the profits of peace.

In this emergent situation it is imperative that none of us—Jews, Palestinians, and other citizens of the world—stand by passively!! Everyone must act to move the peace process back onto its tracks. This is not only a moral command: Stopping the present abysmal situation is deeply in the interest of both societies and the international community.

It is hard to identify the bottom of the barrel, as the fall of the Israeli society continues in spite of past feelings that we had already reached the bottom. Most likely, the bottom is never-ending as history shows and there is no limit to the deterioration that a nation may experience. I realize that not a few will say that I repeat the same feelings and thoughts over and over, yet Israel is still blossoming. I am absolutely convinced this reality cannot go on forever despite its present success. Remember, in the story of the boy who cried "wolf"- the wolf eventually came.

Caring about my country and loving it, I would like in this letter to focus more on the costs for the Israeli Jewish society, because this country is where my children, grandchildren and friends live with their families. I love them

and am afraid that the future generations may pay a heavy price for the blindness of the Israel's present leadership.

Although it is possible to ask different questions –depending on the political orientation—this time I would like to focus mainly on the occupation and ask how is it possible that this prolonged occupation has lasted for 47 years?

There is no doubt that the glorified victory of the 1967 war was the turning point in the societal consciousness of the Jewish people, a great majority of whom viewed the occupation as liberation and redemption for the nation. This view is still deeply entrenched in the dominant ethos, if we take into consideration that the Israeli Jewish population goes through continuous and constant process of indoctrination through socialization in schools, in the army, and even in media, indicating that the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River is the exclusive homeland of the Jews (see for example the platforms of all the major Jewish parties in Israel from 1967 till now or the Israeli maps that are missing the green line of the pre-1967 borders). As a result, for the majority of Jewish Israelis, reaching a peace agreement is viewed as giving up part of the homeland. Thus, in spite of the fact that the majority of the Jews claim to accept (in a very general and unspecified way) the notion of two states for two peoples as a kind of slogan (as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did), they do not accept a division on the basis of 1967 lines and other conditions necessary in order to bring peace. The Jewish Israeli society, as the polls show, is becoming more nationalistic, anti-democratic, xenophobic and racist. In addition, a considerable part of the society (a recent poll show that over 50% of the Jews in Israel define themselves as being on the right with non-compromising views and among young people of age 18-34 the percentage is approaching 60%), including very strong forces in the government, reject any solution of dividing the land, either because of religious dogma, nationalistic ideology and/or security concerns. Furthermore, after years of brainwashing with the generalized representation that Palestinian Arabs are violent and untrustworthy, Israeli leaders successfully imparted to many Jews the idea that Palestinians, and especially their leaders, are not partners for peace and that their only aspiration is to destroy Israeli state.

In addition to the psychological difficulty to divide the land, the most important factor that paralyzes the Jewish population in Israel and the world is fear. Indeed there are many indications of dangers that appear from different corners of the region, but they are tremendously augmented and misused by Israel's top leadership, which regards threats as a fundamental part of its ideology. This approach leads to complete distrust not only of the Arabs and Palestinians, but also of the entire world that is judged on one basis: whether it supports the Israeli cause or not. Thus if one does not accept Israeli logic and practice, it is viewed as being against the State and the Jewish people. This fear is intentionally perpetuated in connection to the genocide of Jews during the World War II and the Holocaust, which is employed as a parallel to today's situation and as a lesson that the world is hostile and anti-Semitic, and no nation can be trusted.

We need to recognize that Israeli Jewish society is witnessing a demographic and political growth of fundamentalist and/or nationalistic spoilers who adhere to the vision of a Greater Israel. Many of them also possess world views that negate democratic code. They have tremendous political power and considerable resources to expand Jewish settlements, which are subsidized to a great degree by official institutions and the government and are beyond democratic, normative control. These actions of the spoilers, who also are the strongest part of the government, not only hurt the peace process, but also seriously damage the democratic nature of the State of Israel.

Another reason for the continuation of the occupation is backing from the Jewish Diaspora establishment, the one that is connected to Israeli government and unequivocally supports the policies of the government, sends considerable resources to the rightist-nationalistic forces in Israel and presses the governments and media of the world to avoid criticism of Israel's immoral policies (for example the largest circulated freely daily newspaper in Israel *Israel Hayom* that supports unequivocally the policies of the Prime Minister Netanyahu is owned and financed by Sheldon Adelson, an American business magnate and supporter of the Prime Minister). The fear of foreign governments and press being labeled as anti-Semitic leads them to paralysis, allowing Israel to persist in its immoral policies and acts against international law. Lastly, but not least, the situation is perpetuated by the unconditional support of the superpower, the USA, with a Congress being more hawkish than the Israeli parliament. The USA vetoed 42 UN Security Council resolutions from 1972 to 2011—some in contradiction to its official policy viewing Jewish settlements as violation of international law. I am not insinuating that other voices, bravely fighting for peace and a better Israeli society, are absent from the stage: Forces like JStreet or JCall are lights that energize our struggle for a better Israel.

Israel is a vibrant state with remarkable technological-scientific developments in many areas, a successful economy and flourishing cultural achievements that can compete with any country in the world. It has amazing archeological excavations, interesting and entertaining cities, beautiful beaches and landscapes and great cafes. Engulfed by ethos of conflict that is propagated by the formal institutions and channels of communication, people can live well without making any attempt to know what is happening ten kilometers east. Jews as well as foreigners are shown the accomplishments and success of Israel and directed to the traumatic imprinting events of the Holocaust and/or to the violent acts of Palestinians that are supposed to explain the present policies and

acts of the Israeli government. It is true - it is possible to live well in Israel, being disconnected from the occupational reality with its severe consequences. I observe this phenomenon with horror because it demonstrates to me how human beings can allow the performance of the most serious inhuman acts by simply standing by. It has happened in the past and is happening today, even among Jews who themselves were victims of indifference and repression. But for some of us, it is very difficult to accept the moral deterioration because the present situation of Israel negates our fundamental principles of democracy and morality.

Israel is the only occupying state in the world in which the occupied population does not have political and economic rights. The occupation has lasted 47 years—twice as long as the State of Israel prior existence, recognized by the international community within the confines of the green lines. The lasting occupation cannot operate separately from the occupying society, which cannot seal itself off from the occupation and its effects. This connection becomes especially pronounced when the occupier not only penetrates the spaces of the occupied territories, but also settles in these areas, which are perceived as a continuation of the homeland territory, as in the Israeli case. It is necessary to know that already in this occupied territory, including East Jerusalem, there are about 550,000 Jewish settlers (in East Jerusalem about 200,000 and the rest in 126 settlements and in 100 outposts –about 30% built on privately owned Palestinian land), making it, at present, almost impossible to divide the territory (even since the beginning of the peace negotiations in July 2013, Israel has promoted plans or issued tenders for 13,851 Jewish homes, and in 2013 Israel increased its expansion of Jewish settlements by 123%). These processes also affect the Israeli occupying society because once the occupation begins, a multifaceted and continuous interaction between occupier and occupied society necessarily occurs, usually starting with resistance to the occupation. Under such conditions, boundaries become blurred and interactive processes permeate the two territories, initiating long-term changes in every aspect of the occupying society's life: New goals, interests, needs, trends, and developments appear to expand the Jewish settlement in the West Bank and to exploit its resources; But, first of all there is a need to control the Palestinians with Israeli institutions and organizations to assure that they will not resist occupation, and to inhibit their national aspirations (thus the Israeli army, general security forces and police have to exercise power and supervision that leads often and unavoidably to violations of human rights); New dogmas arise to justify the continuing occupation, taking Jewish religious perspectives, nationalistic orientations and/or security as a world view; New interest groups emerge that have the goal of keeping the West Bank under Jewish occupation and even annexing it (the Jewish settlers); A new societal structure emerges in which Jewish settlers get unprecedented subsidies, influence and a free hand to implement their ideology (already through decades residents of the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River are formally categorized into at least three categories: citizens of Israel, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem and Palestinian residents of the West Bank, with different civil rights); New norms, language, and moral standards develop to support the occupation (for example, differential treatment of the Jewish and Palestinian populations living in the same areas); Economic investments are made in the Jewish settlements (until now the rough estimation is at least about 30 billion dollars, not counting the military needs that result from this settlement and the occupation in general); The desire arises to seize and exploit resources (see the recent ruling by the Israeli Supreme Court that allowed this exploitation, and at the same time Israel does not allow Palestinian economic development and uses the cheap Palestinian labor force); A new political culture evolves to maintain the occupation and weaken democracy (a culture that blinds people with use of language from "1984"-- a culture that supports the ideology and policies of the government and suppresses those who oppose them by legislating laws and carrying out other practices- a culture in which the government is limiting democracy step by step and now tries to define Israel legally as a Jewish state with severe implications for the non-Jewish minority constituting 20% of all citizens); New security needs and new military strategies are developed (Israeli security forces are designated not only to maintain occupation and prevent and fight Palestinian resistance to occupation, but also to guard Jewish settlements-these same security forces who are adept at unravelling almost every intention to harm Jews, do not succeed in preventing and even untangling the ongoing violence perpetrated against Palestinians by Jews); New educational pattern emerges propagating a one-sided narrative and limiting critical views; new legal norms and system evolves (for example special legal system for trying the occupied population and norms of unlawfulness by Jews in the occupied territories); new trade markets appear (Israeli export to the West Bank and control of the Palestinian economy); and groups emerge that object to the occupation and carry out a political struggle against it, reflecting the evolving sociopolitical polarization.

The final point has special implications for the democratic nature of the Israeli state because the Israeli government as well as some political parties and NGOs, in their attempts to preserve the official policies and the official Israeli narrative, use all the means at their disposal to prevent exposure to information that may negate the propagated views. To achieve this goal, they use punishments, sanctions, legislation and delegitimization of sources (individuals, groups, NGOs) and their messages. Although the Israeli mass media enjoys formal freedom and there are critical debates about the direction Israel is taking, the government tries to control the media, which in times of military tension mobilizes itself to support official policies (Israel is rated number 96 for its press freedom among 181 states). Moreover Israel carries out institutionalized discrimination against the Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel, who are viewed as a fifth column (this discrimination is not only

institutionalized but also has become legal because a number of laws were legislated specifically to discriminate against this population). Jews in the world should pay an attention to the double standard that Israel is practicing between the demands to treat Jewish minorities and Jewish holy places in the states of the world and its treatment of minorities and their holy places in the state of Israel. In addition to the noted practices of discrimination of minorities in Israel, inhuman treatment of African refugees who arrived to Israel escaping from violence, persecution and unbearable economic conditions of life, cases of hate crime performed by Jews have become prevalent, without determined massive condemnation by the government and their successful prevention or arrest of the performers.

It is hard to look in the mirror because occupation is, by its nature, brutal, discriminative, and oppressive. If we look only at some of the information from 2013, Jewish settlements were constructed in just a bit over 1% of the West Bank's territory, but they control about 43% of the West Bank in their municipal boundaries and the majority of its water and natural resources; an estimated 700,000 Palestinians were imprisoned in Israel between 1967 and 2007; between 1990 and 2006 over 150,000 Palestinians were tried in the Israeli military courts; 1,000–1,500 Palestinians are interrogated by the Shin Bet (security service) annually and 85% of them are subjected to methods that fall under the definition of torture; in the past 12 years alone, at least 7,500 children between the ages of 12 and 17 are estimated to have been detained, interrogated, and imprisoned; over 24,100 Palestinian houses were demolished between 1967 and April 7, 2009, leaving 70,000 Palestinians homeless—and I did not even talk yet about civilian Palestinians and Israeli Jews being killed and injured.

In addition while most of the countries of the world cherish democracy as the preferable political system and Israel self-proclaims itself as one of the strongest democracy, the reality is different. Israel is steadily moving away from the boundaries of democracy. This way finds expression in the spate of bills that seek to limit criticism of the government and the State, to restrict freedom of speech, to legalize illegal polices, to expand Jewish nature of the state over the democratic counterpart and to harm the Arab minority. Racist, nationalistic and antidemocratic rhetoric and acts have become part of the normative life of the society.

In this context, the self-presentation of the state as having the most moral army and lively democracy is for a blind audience. The increasingly dominant nationalistic, expansionist, anti-democratic ideology, goals and policies are crossing the red lines of democratic norms and moral codes. The ongoing occupation and the expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories violate the basic human and collective rights of the Palestinians, and lead to the deterioration of the democratic and moral fabric of the Israeli state and society. Taken together, these are serious deviations from the principles of equality, freedom, human rights, and justice that should guide societies.

Many people may ask me why I am not also addressing the way Palestinians manage the conflict and themselves, the way Syrians deal with their conflict, or Egyptians manage their disagreements or focus on other the evil acts in the world. It is not that I do not care about them, but as an Israeli Jew who loves my country I see a moral obligation to ring the bell in order to avert the dangers that I perceive today in the path the Israeli government is leading the Jewish people and the way the majority of Israeli Jewish society supports it. Liu Xiaobo from China, Wangari Muta Maathai from Kenya, or Shirin Ebadi from Iran (all received the Nobel Peace Prize) are never asked by Jews why they criticize their countries, but, on contrary, they are actually applauded for taking the risk. Yet there are Jews in Israel and in many other countries that self-impose silence on such critical views of the Jewish society and the Israeli state. This is probably an example of hypocritical human nature to prevent criticism of your own group, while applauding the criticism of the out-group by its members. I deeply believe that it is an ultimate obligation and responsibility of human beings first of all to observe, to report and to struggle against the wrongdoing of their own state and society. If this rule would have been realized, the world would look a better place to live in.

What is needed is an end to the occupation. Different proposals have been put forth to end it, beginning with unilateral withdrawal, negotiations in line with Clinton's parameters, or the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative that was launched at the Arab League Summit in Beirut in 2002, based upon the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, alongside the State of Israel. Instead, our government forges ahead with expansionist policies that, if not quickly halted, will render a two-state solution impossible.

The future looks bleak, as the occupation cannot continue. Though it is possible that the world has accepted Israeli violations of human rights and international law and will not initiate any serious protests in the coming years, this situation cannot continue endlessly. Eventually the barrel of dynamite will explode, because of accumulated deprivation, discrimination, and oppression. Then the people in this area—Jews and Palestinians alike— will pay the price for the inaction of their leaders, societies, organizations, and individuals. The next generation will go through turmoil that will have serious consequences for the peoples living in this area.

Israel has to adopt democratic, moral and humanistic values that are underpinning a better world. They must to accompany particularistic values of Jewish identity and together should serve as a compass to the society. Let's not forget that Jewish heritage also provides foundations for moral and humanistic principles.

This letter is one more wake up call to the Jews of the world—and especially of the U.S.—to understand that their unequivocal support for immoral policies is detrimental to the well-being of the Israeli state. They need to stop the **occupartheid** because, for many of them, it contradicts their basic values. Also, I feel that it is important that voices that express moral values will be heard continuously and loudly. There is a substantial minority of Jews in Israel who voice similar beliefs through different means—media commentaries, films, theatrical plays, paintings, books, NGO activities and even political platforms and speeches. Courage is needed to express these views, but they are a must because these voices provide a determinative compass to the rest of the society and sign of hope to the world. It is possible to avert the danger in spite of the grave situation. I believe this depends on us. Human beings led to the present stalemate and other people can change the march of folly.

A rabbi in Israel told me that hope was the crucial element that allowed Jews to survive the dark periods of history. Thus, in the same line, hope is what is left for us—to believe that the present, unbearable situation is only temporary and, soon, a new horizon will appear and, with it, a new tomorrow. But the goals of hope cannot be realized without action. Thus, this letter is a call for everyone to open their eyes and find at least one way to express the need for an end to the present situation. It is written in the best of the Jewish tradition of Tikkun Olam that expresses responsibility to struggle for a better world.

Daniel Bar-Tal

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