

DISCOVERING THE OTHER IN THE GALILEE, May 1, 2009

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As an adult immigrant from the multicultural, individualistic, theistic democracy of the United States that formed me, as one who left his entire extended family and essentially abandoned his parents to come here, as a Reform Jew, as a utopian Zionist, as a white middle class male, as a PhD and rabbi, as the father of three children who served in the Israeli army, as a member of a small, homogeneous rural community... I discover the Other in the Galilee every day. There are so many here who are Other to me, and whom I have to work to see and to see into, as opposed to just looking past them. Every day here, after twenty years, I am reminded of how little I understand and how much more there is to learn about the experiences and perspectives, about the humanity, of all these Others among whom I live.

As is customary at gatherings like this one, it would be easy to give a short sermon on the importance of this discovery, on the value of looking at and listening to the Other and trying to discover who s/he really is, enabling us to form a human relationship that would transcend the various conflicts that divide us.

However, that seems to me to be the easy way out, kind of a "cop-out". Over the past several years I've had the opportunity to visit South Africa several times, and to be amazed by the process of change that nation has undergone since Apartheid. One of the most interesting aspects was the Truth and Reconciliation commission process, which I have studied a bit. And in one essay on the process by a Christian clergyman, I read a sentence that has stayed with me now for years:

Reconciliation without restorative justice is merely a salve for the conscience of the privileged.

It is very well to talk about reconciliation on the personal level, about discovering and accepting the Other, about "moving on." However, if the framework in which this is supposed to take place is fraught with injustice – or even perceived injustice – then the process is hypocritical at best.

It seems to me that in our situation here vis a vis Jews and Arabs in the state of Israel, we face a complex framework which does not allow us to consider reconciliation in a vacuum. Specifically, there are at least four dimensions to be considered:

1. The philosophical/political. What does it mean for Israel to declare itself to be a Jewish state and a democracy? It may well be that such a combination is possible – but so far, no one has spelled out just how to do it; indeed, among the Jewish majority there is nothing even approaching consensus on how to define a Jewish state, and what should be its relationship to democracy. Hence, there is a lingering doubt, an uncertainty, a vagueness, about how the political and cultural framework of the state relates to its citizens who are not Jewish. When Zionism attempted to redefine Judaism as a modern nationality instead of a religion, it opened a difficult and complicated discussion that is still unresolved. We can be best of friends as individuals, but if there are questions about political status, about equality of opportunity, about distribution of power, about loyalty to the framework – then there is something false in our friendship.

2. The historical. We have in many cases conflicting versions of our history in this region, and since we are operating in a context of nationalism, national historical narratives are deeply influential on our respective identities and our perception of the Other. I may be able to accept the other, and find common interests and values and humanity, but if deep down inside I am carrying around a collective memory in which I am his/her victim – he stole my land, she killed my grandfather, once again, discovering and accepting the Other can be painful and maybe even, for some of us, impossible; this is perhaps our greatest challenge. Meanwhile, history continues. Israel is in a state of armed conflict with Arab states and organizations outside its borders. Much as we would like to be able to say that reality is unconnected to the relationships between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel, it is connected, and makes our relationship to the Other even more complicated and often difficult and painful.

3. The cultural. We live in largely separate communities, attend separate schools, speak different languages, have different cultural norms regarding clan, family, individualism, authority, gender relations, etc. It is often possible to see life in an Arab village in the Galilee as still breaking out of pre-modern modes, while mainstream Israeli society is what some would define as already post-modern. This divide often poses great obstacles to integration, to building a common life, to creating equality of opportunity. There are serious questions of what is possible and at what price. The Jews and other groups in the US jettisoned large sections of their identity and culture as the price of integration. Europe and the Middle East have been trying for a century to create a system of national minorities with a degree of formal cultural autonomy. Europe has not exactly been a success story, and as we speak there is concern about new violence against the Roma there... Can there be cultural autonomy without a political price? Can there be integration without a cultural price?

4. The personal. Maybe this is the easiest, if only we could disassociate it from the previous three: it seems to be a universal phenomenon that people distrust, fear, even hate those who are different from them. We experience here old fashioned simple racism, prejudice, mutual ignorance, fears founded on demagoguery, all the ills we find in all societies everywhere, compounded, of course by the uneven distribution of power between a dominant majority and a minority. Here, the role of education, of dialogue, of social integration, of shared interests in the workplace and in public concerns like the environment – can have impact, helping break down prejudices and fears and creating partnership. However, is it realistic to expect to make progress in the personal area when lurking in the background are the weighty factors mentioned above, of defining the nature of our ideal society here, of defusing the historical memories and current fears that won't leave us alone? The question is, of course, where do we begin? Can we begin to solve the bigger issues – the political/philosophical, the historical – by starting with the human and the cultural? Or is it foolish to play around with human and cultural issues when the philosophical and historical conflicts cast a pall, rendering our efforts trivial? I have spent the past twenty years struggling with that question, and my work assumes that you can start from the human and the cultural to create a climate for discourse about the more difficult issues. But I don't know if that is right. I really don't know.