



The Soil of Everyman

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Human nature frequently indulges delusion. Why is that? Psychologists will still be trying to work that out for centuries to come. So, in a way, it's a wide open fun park for amateurs. I'm one, and living where we do, it is the topic of the hour. As I start this meditation the debacle in Gaza is reaching its screeching crescendo of human violence, suffering and international cynicism. It's right on the cusp of becoming the most publicly played out genocide in world history, a horror to observe on so many different levels. And it's all so delusional ... so blatantly irrational. What's stares you in the face is the fact that *it can be stopped*.

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At Nancy's strong urging I picked up and have just finished reading *The Lemon Tree* by Sandy Tolan. I wasn't going to read it. Some of us who've circled around the Palestine-Israel black hole for decades eventually sense that we've gotten perilously close to the event horizon and face the prospect of being sucked down into that horrific gravity well where all reality simply comes unglued. Beyond it is insanity. From Nancy's description and that of Chris Oldham, the friend who loaned us the book, I thought this would be just one more pulp piece in a genre that's almost all pulp ... brain-numbing useless stuff. But eventually, to keep the peace, I picked it up with a kind of sneering sense of immune superiority. After all, in my own modest and frankly largely fruitless way, I've got the battle scars and bruises that show I've fought the ideological war in the trenches. What more could I learn at this stage?

Well, folks, I've learned and learned more than I bargained for. Thank God for young and well-endowed minds! If anything, *The Lemon Tree* is the sort of mental thruster that, properly harnessed and aimed, can break the grip of the Palestine-Israel black hole's gravity well of despair and bring us back to a manageable orbit. In a word, it is the best thing I've read about this ghastly problem in decades. (And the problem grows more ghastly by the minute!) It's an '*absolutely must read*' not only because it is written magnificently and exhaustively researched. Those things are just craft and honest mechanics. The art lies in constructing the material without distorting it. The art of the book is utterly magnificent.

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Tolan succeeds in bringing the reader back to human basics ... to relationships between breathing persons caught on opposite sides of a violently destructive and irrational divide, and shows that love is possible. It is a tale of star-crossed lovers, and right up until the end of the narrative you're pulling for a happy resolution that never quite happens. In that respect, it's a tragedy but one that is bitter-sweet. Tolan masks neither the violence nor the irrationality. If he 'takes sides' it is with his principal protagonists, an Israeli woman and a Palestinian man.

The thing is *The Lemon Tree* is neither fiction nor fictionalized history. The author, in his introductory note, observes, “By juxtaposing and joining the histories of two families, ... and placing them in the larger context of the days’ events, I hope to help build an understanding of the reality and the history of two peoples on the same land.” And he has done just that. Interspersed with finely judged historical narratives, it is a story told by the principals and their intimates as they struggle with their historical circumstances.

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It was surrealistic to have been reading *The Lemon Tree* as the current travesty of Gaza unfolded, and to have reached its end before that travesty concluded.

Tolan, by profession a journalist, tells stories that he hopes matter. And this story matters a great deal. The Israeli protagonist is Dalia Eshkenazi Landau, daughter of Moshe and Solia Eshkenazi, Bulgarian Jews who emigrated to the new State of Israel in 1948, and were eventually given a sturdy and rather beautiful house built by Ahmad Khairi (though they did not know that at the time) in the mid-sized town of al-Ramla. The Palestinian is Bashir Khairi, son of Ahmad Khairi and his wife, Zakia, whose family roots in al-Ramla stretch back a thousand years. Along with his friend, a Jewish architect and builder, Ahmad built his family home in 1936. In 1948 he and his family were expelled on the order of then-Lieutenant Colonel Ytzhak Rabin instructed by David Ben-Gurion. When Rabin and Yigal Alon asked Ben-Gurion what should happen with the civilian populations of al-Ramla and Lydda, Rabin recalled later that Ben-Gurion “... waved his hand in a gesture which said, ‘Drive them out!’” (p. 112) So Rabin did that. The family wound up as refugees in Ramallah.

When Israel was created Dalia was one year old and Bashir was six. They met as young adults during the deceptive calm after the Six Day War of 1967. In July, a month after the war, Bashir and two cousins visited their old town of al-Ramla, a journey into their pasts ... their roots. Of the three homes they saw, only Dalia in the old Khairi homestead welcomed them in. Then a university student in English, it was impulsive on her part, but it transformed her; for Bashir, a young law student, it was a shock, an emotionally confusing moment. In the upshot, neither was ever after able to discount the other nor their mutual histories symbolized by the lemon tree that Ahmad Khairi had planted in the backyard of the family home, a gift the Eshkenazis enjoyed.

Tolan follows the story over the next five and a half torrid decades. Over that space of time, Bashir spent nearly two decades in real or *de facto* Israeli prisons for his insistence upon his right to return and his activism in that cause, a persistence that associated him with the Leftist ideology of George Habash and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Dalia, for her part, found herself (along with her husband, Yehezkel Landau) migrating toward the Asher Ginsberg (Achad Ha’am) school of Zionism with its insistence upon ethical responsibility for the rights of Palestinians and the need to find some way for Israelis and Palestinians to living together, an ideal whose realization they knew was fast slipping out of their grasp.

For all their very real spiritual intimacy, Dalia and Bashir remained in a strained relationship right up until the end of the narrative. The relationship had a sort of push-me-pull-you dynamic. But their joint achievement came when, following her parents’ deaths, Dalia insisted that their common home become a school for young Palestinian

students and a center where young Palestinians and Israelis might find their common humanity. Bashir agreed to that and the book ends with a defiantly symbolic ritual: The old lemon tree having died, the Palestinian and Israeli young people of the center lovingly set the old tree to one side, and at its roots planted a new lemon tree.

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Tolan has achieved a sort of literary miracle in this book. His critical apparatus is thorough and impeccable. But that's not the point. As a narrator, he has told a story that mesmerizes. It speaks not about political vectors and military or armed struggle. These Tolan doesn't ignore, but he has something so much more important to talk about. He talks about human beings and their inherent (or potential) spiritual bonding. And that's got to count for something.

Years ago, perhaps in 1969, I wrote a poem about Palestine that my friends in Beirut took some exception to at the time, but which now seems to be as appropriate as it did then. It reads, without preface, as follows:

*Yet ... yet again the land recalls
the people it has had and has;*

*in the drought of violence
barbarity is self-devoured
and loose-fleshed lies
of history decompose.*

*Men cannot live on for long
on the refuse of their fathers,*

*but plough it under
in the ancestral fields
and in its stead
sow this day's seed.*

*The loam revives in the tremor
of homeward feet and breathes:*

*"All men's 'yes' to the one
is justice branching in
the soil of everyman
as the land recalls its people."*

So, in the midst of the Gaza holocaust when we may well be witnessing the burnout phase of Zionism as we have known it, this book (and this poem) is sort of a prayer that humanity will out. We may yet get beyond delusion.

And God is merciful ... the *Lord* of mercy.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

NOTE: The longer Reformed Church in America missionaries serve, the more they come to see the ethical implications of Christian faith with the eyes of the people

among whom they serve. We treasure our missionaries and are glad to know what they think. However, RCA Global Mission does not, itself, have partisan political views.