

HOMILY
By David Herndon

Memorial Sunday

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It would have been one thing if the Zionists, who first came to Palestine in 1881, had been content to live as an immigrant community among the native inhabitants of that land.

Unfortunately, starting with the very earliest stages of Zionism, the plan was to transfer the indigenous people of Palestine to some other place so that the Zionists could enjoy exclusive possession of the land. For example, in 1895, Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, wrote the following in his diary with regard to the fate he envisioned for the non-Jews who had been living in Palestine for centuries: “We must expropriate gently. . . . We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own. . . . Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly.”¹ In 1937, the Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion wrote: “We must expel Arabs and take their places.”² And in 1940, Joseph Weitz, who coordinated settlement activities for the Jewish National Fund, wrote: “Among ourselves it must be clear that there is no place in the country for both peoples together.”³ Weitz also wrote: “The only solution is to transfer the Arabs from here to neighbouring countries. Not a single village or a single tribe must be let off.”⁴

One of the practical measures taken by the Zionists to advance their plan for an ethnically pure state was the so-called Village Project, whereby the Zionists gathered detailed information about more than a thousand Palestinian villages. In his book The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine, Israeli historian Ilan Pappé describes the Village Project in this way: “By the late 1930s, this ‘archive’ was almost complete. Precise details were

¹ Benny Morris, Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881 – 2001, second edition (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 2001), pp. 21-22.

² John Quigley, The Case for Palestine (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 25.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ilan Pappé, The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), p. 62.

recorded about the topographic location of each village, its access roads, quality of land, water springs, main sources of income, its socio-political composition, religious affiliations, names of its mukhtars, its relationship with other villages, the age of individual men (sixteen to fifty) and many more. An important category was an index of 'hostility' (towards the Zionist project, that is), decided by the level of the village's participation in the revolt of 1936. There was a list of everyone who had been involved in the revolt and the families of those who had lost someone in the fight against the British. Particular attention was given to people who had allegedly killed Jews. . . . in 1948 these last bits of information fuelled the worst atrocities in the villages, leading to mass executions and torture."⁵ "Files in the post-1943 era included detailed descriptions of the husbandry, the cultivated land, the number of trees in plantations, the quality of each fruit grove (even of each single tree), the average amount of land per family, the number of cars, shop owners, members of workshops and the names of the artisans in each village and their skills. Later, meticulous detail was added about each clan and its political affiliation, the social stratification between notables and common peasants, and the names of the civil servants in the Mandatory government. . . . one finds additional details popping up around 1945, such as descriptions of village mosques and the names of their imams, together with such characterizations as 'he is an ordinary man', and even precise accounts of the living rooms inside the homes of these dignitaries. Towards the end of the Mandatory period the information becomes more explicitly military oriented: the number of guards (most villages had none) and the quantity and quality of the arms at the villagers' disposal (generally antiquated or even non-existent)."⁶ "The final update of the village file took place in 1947. It focused on creating lists of 'wanted' persons in each village. In 1948 Jewish troops used these lists for search-and-arrest operations they carried out as soon as they had occupied a village. That is, the men in the village would be lined up and those appearing on the lists would then be identified . . . The men who were picked out were often shot on the spot."⁷

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations adopted a plan for the partition of Palestine between the immigrant Jewish community and the indigenous inhabitants. At the time, the Jewish community owned 5.8 percent of the land and they constituted thirty percent of the population. Yet the United Nations partition plan gave the Jewish community fifty-six percent of Palestine. Ilan Pappé offers this comment: "The injustice was as striking then as it appears now, and yet it was hardly commented on at the time by any of the leading Western newspapers then covering Palestine: the Jews, who owned less than six per cent of the total land area of Palestine and constituted no more than one third of the population, were handed more than half of its overall territory."⁸

The British Mandate for Palestine was scheduled to conclude on May 15, 1948. But starting in December, 1947, the Zionist military forces began a systematic expulsion and dispossession of the Palestinian people, in accord with long-standing Zionist intentions, using the detailed records of the Village Project. On March 10, the Zionist leaders adopted Plan D, which authorized the destruction of Palestinian villages. Here is

⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

an excerpt from Plan D: “These operations can be carried out in the following manner: either by destroying villages (by setting fire to them, by blowing them up, and by planting mines in their debris) and especially of those population centers which are difficult to control continuously; or by mounting combing and control operations according to the following guidelines: encirclement of the villages, conducting a search inside them. In case of resistance, the armed forces must be wiped out and the populations expelled outside the borders of the state.”⁹ At the beginning of 1948, the Zionist military leader Yigal Allon said this about the intended spirit of the ethnic cleansing operations: “There is a need now for strong and brutal reaction. We need to be accurate about timing, place, and those we hit. If we accuse a family—we need to harm them without mercy, women and children included. Otherwise, this is not an effective reaction. During the operation there is no need to distinguish between guilty and not guilty.”¹⁰

The dispossession and expulsion of the indigenous Palestinian people by the Zionists continued for several months after Israel declared its independence on May 15, 1948. Ilan Pappé writes: “When it was over, more than half of Palestine’s native population, close to 800,000 people, had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed, and eleven urban neighborhoods emptied of their inhabitants.”¹¹

Caryl Churchill’s play “Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza” makes several references to the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people:

Don’t tell her who they are.
Tell her they live in tents.
Tell her this wasn’t their home.
Don’t tell her home, not home, tell her they’re going away.
Don’t tell her who used to live in this house.
[D]on’t tell her Arabs used to sleep in her bedroom.
Tell her for miles and miles all round they have lands of their own.
Don’t tell her they said it was a land without people.

Then we hear one of the most revealing lines in the whole play:

Don’t tell her I wouldn’t have come if I’d known.

This line reveals a remorseful recognition of the fly in the ointment, the crack in the foundation, the rain on the parade, the moral problem with Zionism: the land already had people, non-Jewish people, people who had lived there for hundreds of years, Muslim communities that traced their origins back twelve hundred years, Christian communities that traced their origins back nearly two thousand years. In pursuit of the Zionist vision, nearly 800,000 of these non-Jewish people had been forcibly removed.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

Don't tell her I wouldn't have come if I'd known.

Might this line betray some recognition that the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 was a profoundly unjust and immoral thing to do? Yet the door opening toward this recognition slams shut with the next angrily dismissive line:

Don't tell her that.

After that pivotal scene, the play continues to trace the history and the mood of those involved with that history. We fast forward through the Six Day War in 1967 and the Intifada of 2000 and its aftermath, and then we arrive at Gaza. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights reports that “over 1,400 Palestinians were killed, including at the very least 850 civilians, 300 children and 110 women. Over 5,000 Palestinians were wounded.” The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights goes on to report that four Israeli civilians were killed and that ten Israeli soldiers were killed, three by friendly fire. White phosphorus was used as an incendiary weapon in densely populated areas. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights also offers these facts: “Over 3,000 homes were destroyed and over 11,000 damaged; 215 factories and 700 private businesses were seriously damaged or destroyed; 15 hospitals and 43 primary care centers were destroyed or damaged; 28 government buildings and 60 police stations were destroyed or damaged; 30 mosques were destroyed and 28 damaged; three universities/colleges were destroyed and 14 damaged; and 53 United Nations properties were damaged.”

It was out of her awareness of this devastation that Caryl Churchill, one of the most well-known and well-respected playwrights in England, wrote “Seven Jewish Children.” What are we to make of the situation? What should happen? What needs to happen? Churchill offers no easy answers, but by pointing us back into the history of the situation, she offers us a clue.

Thus, one moral conclusion that I find in the history is this: Setting aside the question of whether Israel has a right to exist, surely the State of Israel did not have a right to come into existence by ethnically cleansing three-quarters of a million indigenous Palestinians from land that was theirs, land they had occupied for hundreds of years. I would add that while the Israelis should not be held to a higher standard of morality than other people, neither should the Palestinians be forced to accept and endure a lower standard of justice than other people.

With regard to the future prospects for his country, the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé writes that “unless Israel acknowledges the cardinal role it has played, and continues to play, in the dispossession of the Palestinian nation, and accepts the consequences this recognition of the ethnic cleansing implies, all attempts to solve the Israel-Palestine conflict are bound to fail . . .”¹²

Tell her the truth about what happened in 1948.
Tell her that all people have inherent worth and dignity.
Tell her that all people have equal human rights.
Tell her that all people deserve equal justice.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

Tell her that the Zionist dream for an ethnically pure nation has impossibly difficult ethical problems.

Tell her that the Zionist dream of an ethnically pure nation has caused untold misery for untold numbers of Palestinian people, including many other children like her.

Tell her that any successful peace process will first require a justice process.

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