

Guest Column, by Ernie Brill and Randy Ross, submitted January 5, 2009

Travel Tickets, by Samih Al Qasim

On the day you kill me
You'll find in my pocket
Travel tickets
To peace,
To the fields and the rain,
To people's conscience.
Don't waste the tickets.

Al Qasim is a Palestinian Israeli citizen who has lived in Israel all his life. "Travel Tickets" speaks to the core moral issues beneath the bombings, brutality, back-and-forth of who started what when. It speaks to our consciences – whether as Jews, US citizens, or human beings. Al Qasim challenges us to search behind media images justifying Israel's war against Hamas, resulting in immense suffering and death for Gaza's people. He challenges us to learn, understand, and act with even-handed compassion.

As long as we view the Palestinian-Israeli conflict purely in terms of "never again," the post-Holocaust rallying cry of Jews and our supporters, we will, in our easily summoned pain, blind ourselves to the moral dilemma at the conflict's core. Here is the conundrum: Jews see Israel as our homeland, our only place of safety from a world that persecuted us for centuries and, in our hour of sacred need, betrayed us by numbly standing by, rather than courageously standing up. Palestinians see as their own the olive and orange groves, the earth they cultivated for generations and on which Israelis now settle, work, walk and pray. In 1948 Palestinians were ejected from this land so Jews could establish a state where they would live safely and "be comfortable...in their Jewishness." (see Larry Hott's *Hampshire Gazette* Guest Column, January 2, 2009).

One people sought a home. One people lost a home. It hasn't stopped: more Jews have come to settle in search of a place where they could feel comfortable in their Jewishness. **Yet at what cost?** As Jewish settlements expand, Palestinians are forcibly driven from their homes, villages bulldozed, walls erected, incomes devastated, poverty widened, education denied. The squeezing of 1.5 million people into tiny Gaza, with its border crossings constantly closed, is the current example before our eyes. Many Jews laud their "birthright" to return to their "ancient homeland," but what about the vanishing Palestinian "birthright?"

Why can't Americans feel empathy for Jews **and** Palestinians? Few enough people in this country understand the poignant history of Jewish culture, the ethical axis of our religion, and our far-reaching contributions to social justice. For too many we are either depressed Holocaust victims or truculent cheerleaders demanding equal time for Chanukah and Passover. Far fewer even know of the Palestinian people's rich history and culture, with such literary giants as Mahmoud Darwish and Edward Said.

Learning others' history and culture can nurture empathy. Yet more is needed. Stereotypes block empathy. Let's acknowledge our own implicit stereotypes. Let's explore their origins in movies, newspapers, TV, books, Internet, classrooms, and places of worship. For an even-handed history of the 1948 conflict, read Sandy Tolan's award-winning book, *The Lemon Tree*. To learn how our images of Arab people are manipulated in film, view the documentary "Reel Bad Arabs" (at Pleasant Street Video). For alternative views of the on-going conflicts, visit web sites such as Al Jazeera, Gush Shalom, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, and Brit Tzedek v'Shalom.

Empathy brings compassion and the desire to act in meaningful ways. As a teacher at Northampton High School, Ernie incorporates a Middle Eastern literature unit, funded by the Northampton Education Foundation. Randy supports the work of Open House, an Arab-Jewish youth reconciliation and nursery school project in Ramle, Israel (see www.friendsofopenhouse.org).

What can you do? Think globally, act locally. Above all, “Don’t waste the tickets.”

Remnants –

Sometimes clichés are true. Great suffering often engenders profound art – Tony Morrison’s *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *the Blues*, Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, Isabel Allende’s *House of Spirits*, films such as *Norma Ray*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Erin Brockovich*, and *The Great Debaters*.

Let’s look inside ourselves. We feel vast empathy for Israel’s Jews, little or none for the Palestinians. Lack of knowledge about their history, culture, or values makes it difficult to understand their perspective on the conflict. Identifying with Israel’s viewpoint is the easier path. Mainstream media’s distorted information and society’s stereotypes contribute to this slant. Each of us bears responsibility for recognizing our personal obstacles to empathizing with those who appear so different at first glance.