

Is an Israeli Jewish sense of victimization perpetuating the conflict with Palestinians?

By Akiva Eldar

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A new study of Jewish Israelis shows that most accept the 'official version' of the history of the conflict with the Palestinians. Is it any wonder, then, that the same public also buys the establishment explanation of the operation in Gaza?

A pioneering research study dealing with Israeli Jews' memory of the conflict with the Arabs, from its inception to the present, came into the world together with the war in Gaza. The sweeping support for Operation Cast Lead confirmed the main diagnosis that arises from the study, conducted by Daniel Bar-Tal, one of the world's leading political psychologists, and Rafi Nets-Zehngut, a doctoral student: Israeli Jews' consciousness is characterized by a sense of victimization, a siege mentality, blind patriotism, belligerence, self-righteousness, dehumanization of the Palestinians and insensitivity to their suffering. The fighting in Gaza dashed the little hope Bar-Tal had left - that this public would exchange the drums of war for the cooing of doves.

"Most of the nation retains a simplistic collective memory of the conflict, a black-and-white memory that portrays us in a very positive light and the Arabs in a very negative one," says the professor from Tel Aviv University. This memory, along with the ethos of the conflict and collective emotions such as fear, hatred and anger, turns into a psycho-social infrastructure of the kind experienced by nations that have been involved in a long-term violent conflict. This infrastructure gives rise to the culture of conflict in which we and the Palestinians are deeply immersed, fanning the flames and preventing progress toward peace. Bar-Tal claims that in such a situation, it is hard even to imagine a possibility that the two nations will be capable of overcoming the psychological obstacles without outside help.

Scholars the world over distinguish between two types of collective memory: popular collective memory - that is, representations of the past that have been adopted by the general public; and official collective memory, or representations of the past that have been adopted by the country's official institutions in the form of publications, books or textbooks.

The idea for researching the popular collective memory of Israeli Jews was raised by Nets-Zehngut, a Tel Aviv lawyer who decided to return to the academic world. At present he is completing his doctoral thesis in the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University's Teachers College. The study, by him and Bar-Tal, entitled "The Israeli-Jewish Collective Memory of the Israeli-Arab/Palestinian Conflict," examines how official collective memory in the State of Israel regarding the creation of the 1948 refugee problem has changed over time.

Bar-Tal became enthusiastic about the idea and, with funding from the

International Peace Research Association Foundation, he conducted a survey in the summer of 2008 among a representative sample of 500 Jewish Israeli adults. The study demonstrated that widespread support for the official memory testifies to a lower level of critical thinking, as well as belief in traditional values, high identification with Jewish identity, a tendency to delegitimize the Arabs, and support for taking aggressive steps against the Palestinians.

In a telephone interview from New York, Nets-Zehngut says it is very clear that those with a "Zionist memory" see Israel and the Jews as the victims in the conflict, and do not tend to support agreements or compromises with the enemy in order to achieve peace. This finding, he explains, demonstrates the importance of changing the collective memory of conflicts, making it less biased and more objective - on condition, of course, that there is a factual basis for such a change.

Bar-Tal, who has won international awards for his scientific work, immigrated to Israel from Poland as a child in the 1950s.

"I grew up in a society that for the most part did not accept the reality that the authorities tried to portray, and fought for a different future," he says. "I have melancholy thoughts about nations where there is an almost total identity between the agents of a conflict, on the one hand, who nurture the siege mentality and the existential fear, and various parts of society, on the other. Nations that respond so easily to battle cries and hesitate to enlist in favor of peace do not leave room for building a better future."

Bar-Tal emphasizes that the Israeli awareness of reality was also forged in the context of Palestinian violence against Israeli citizens, but relies primarily on prolonged indoctrination that is based on ignorance and even nurtures it. In his opinion, an analysis of the present situation indicates that with the exception of a small minority, which is capable of looking at the past with an open mind, the general public is not interested in knowing what Israel did in Gaza for many years; how the disengagement was carried out and why, or what its outcome was for the Palestinians; why Hamas came to power in democratic elections; how many people were killed in Gaza from the disengagement until the start of the recent war; and whether it was possible to extend the recent cease-fire or even who violated it first.

"Although there are accessible sources, where it is possible to find the answers to those questions, the public practices self-censorship and accepts the establishment version, out of an unwillingness to open up to alternative information - they don't want to be confused with the facts. We are a nation that lives in the past, suffused with anxiety and suffering from chronic closed-mindedness," charges Bar-Tal.

That describes the state of mind in 2000, when most of the public accepted the simplistic version of then-prime minister Ehud Barak regarding the failure of the Camp David summit and the outbreak of the second intifada, and reached what seemed like the obvious conclusion that "there is no partner" with whom to negotiate.

Bar-Tal: "After the bitter experience of the Second Lebanon War, during which the memory of the war was taken out of their hands and allowed to be formed freely, the country's leaders learned their lesson, and decided that they wouldn't let that happen again. They were not satisfied with attempts to inculcate Palestinian awareness and tried to influence Jewish awareness in Israel as well. For that purpose, heavy censorship and monitoring of information were imposed" during the Gaza campaign.

The professor believes that politicians would not have been successful in formulating the collective memory of such a large public without the willing enlistment of the media. Almost all the media focused only on the sense of victimization of the residents of the so-called "Gaza envelope" and the south. They did not provide the broader context of the military operation and almost completely ignored - before and during the fighting - the situation of the residents of besieged Gaza. The human stories from Sderot and the dehumanization of Hamas and the Palestinians provided the motivation for striking at Gaza with full force.

Nets-Zehngut and Bar-Tal find a close connection between the collective memory and the memory of "past persecutions of Jews" ("the whole world is against us," and the Holocaust). The more significant the memory of persecution, the stronger the tendency to adopt Zionist narratives. From this we can understand the finding that adults, the religious public and those with more right-wing political views tend to adopt the Zionist version of the conflict, while young people, the secular public and those with left-wing views tend more to adopt critical narratives.

The atmosphere in the street and in the media during the weeks of the Gaza war seems to have confirmed the central finding of the study: "The ethos of the conflict is deeply implanted in Jewish society in Israel. It is a strongly rooted ideology that justifies the goals of the Jews, adopts their version, presents them in a very positive light and rejects the legitimacy of the Arabs, and primarily of the Palestinians," notes Bar-Tal.

For example, when asked the question, "What were the reasons for the failure of the negotiations between [Ehud] Barak and [Yasser] Arafat in summer 2000?" 55.6 percent of the respondents selected the following answer: "Barak offered Arafat a very generous peace agreement, but Arafat declined mainly because he did not want peace." Another 25.4 percent believed that both parties were responsible for the failure, and about 3 percent replied that Arafat did want peace, but Barak was not forthcoming enough in meeting the needs of the Palestinians. (Sixteen percent replied that they didn't know the answer.)

Over 45 percent of Israeli Jews have imprinted on their memories the version that the second intifada broke out only, or principally, because Arafat planned the conflict in advance. Only 15 percent of them believe the viewpoint presented by three heads of the Shin Bet security services: that the intifada was mainly the eruption of a popular protest. Over half those polled hold the Palestinians responsible for the failure of the Oslo process, 6 percent hold Israel responsible, and 28.4 percent said both sides were equally responsible.

Among the same Jewish public, 40 percent are unaware that at the end of the 19th century, the Arabs were an absolute majority among the inhabitants of the Land of Israel. Over half of respondents replied that in the United Nations partition plan, which was rejected by the Arabs, the Arabs received an equal or larger part of the territory of the Land of Israel, relative to their numbers; 26.6 percent did not know that the plan offered the 1.3 million Arabs a smaller part of the territory (44 percent) than was offered to 600,000 Jews (55 percent).

Bar-Tal claims that this distortion of memory is no coincidence. He says that the details of the plan do not appear in any textbook, and this is a deliberate omission. "Knowledge of how the land was divided could arouse questions regarding the reason why the Arabs rejected the plan and make it possible to question the simplistic version: We accepted the partition plan, they didn't."

However, his study shows that a larger percentage of the Jewish population in Israel believes that in 1948, the refugees were expelled (47.2 percent of respondents), than those who still retain the old Zionist version (40.8 percent), according to which the refugees left on their own initiative. On this point, not only do almost all the history books provide up-to-date information, but some local school textbooks do as well. Even on the television program "Tekuma" ("Rebirth," a 1998 documentary series about Israel's first 50 years), the expulsion of the Arabs was mentioned.

Nets-Zehngut also finds a degree of self-criticism in the answers relating to the question of overall responsibility for the conflict. Of those surveyed, 46 percent think that the responsibility is more or less evenly divided between Jews and Arabs, 4.3 percent think that the Jews are mainly to blame, and 43 percent think that the Arabs and the Palestinians are mainly to blame for the outbreak and continuation of the conflict. It turns out, therefore, that when the country's education system and media are willing to deal with distorted narratives, even a collective memory that has been etched into people's minds for years can be changed.

Bar-Tal says he takes no comfort in the knowledge that Palestinian collective memory suffers from similar ills, and that it is also in need of a profound change - a change that would help future generations on both sides to regard one another in a more balanced, and mainly a more humane manner. This process took many decades for the French and the Germans, and for the Protestants and the Catholics in Northern Ireland. When will it finally begin here, too?

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