



My Enemy,

In May 2008 Israel celebrated *its sixtieth anniversary. Palestinians marked the occasion as well; they mourned it as the anniversary of al-Nakba, “the catastrophe.”*

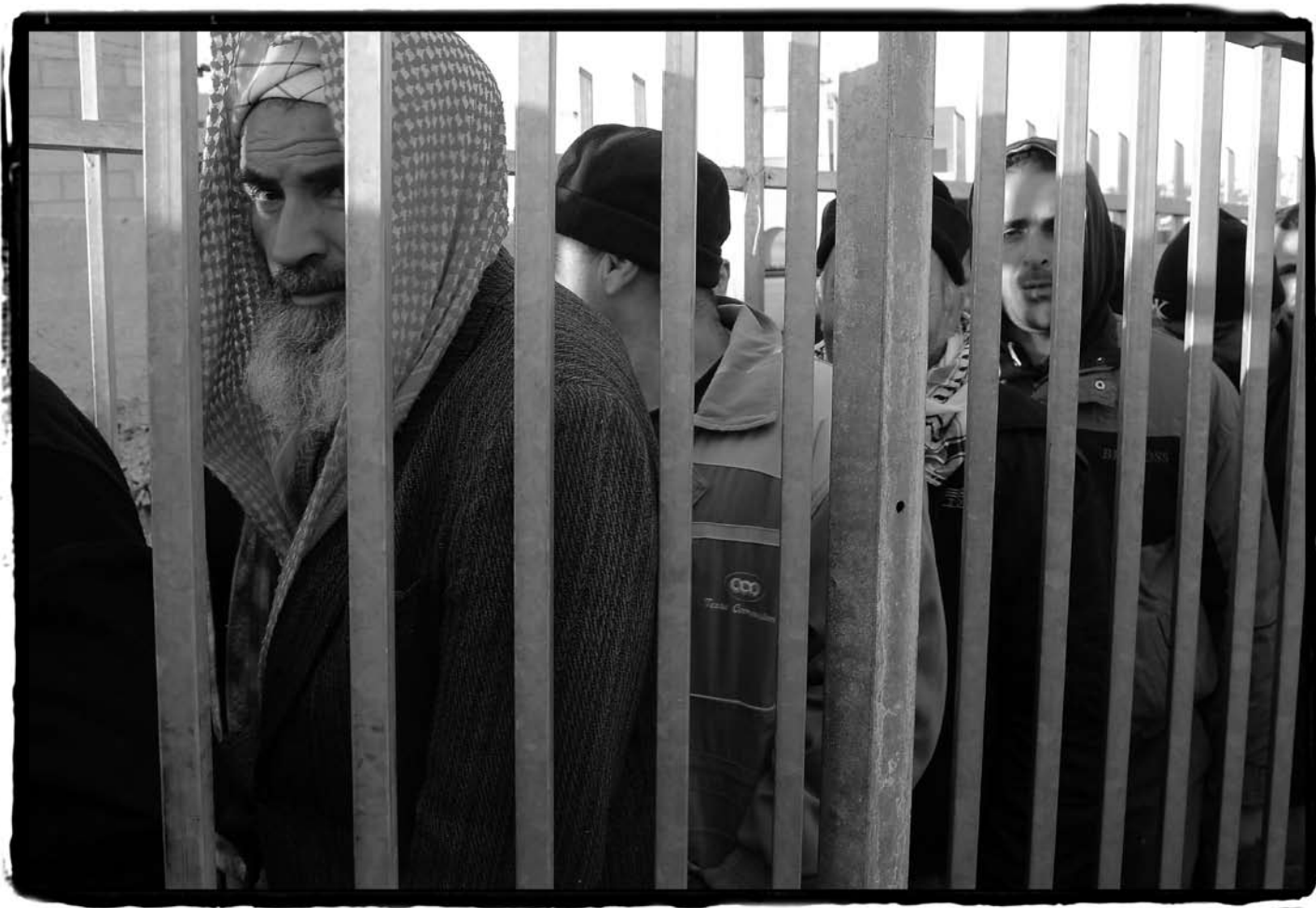
The land that is now known as Israel and Palestine holds immense historical and cultural significance for Jews and for Arabs. Both claim it as a homeland, and Arabs and Jews have coexisted in that spot for millennia. Over the centuries a number of rulers attempted to expel the Jews, but many stayed or migrated back to the area. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, Jews suffering persecution in Europe and elsewhere started the Zionist movement, which called for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. In the face of increasing Jewish immigration, Palestinians resisted this claim to land they saw as theirs, and tensions between the two groups intensified.

After 6 million European Jews were killed in the Holocaust — known in Hebrew as the “Shoah” — and hundreds of thousands more made refugees, the United Nations partitioned Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. Arabs in Palestine and neighboring countries rejected the partition plan, but on May 14,

1948, Jewish leaders proclaimed the independence of the state of Israel. Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon declared war on the new nation. By the end of the yearlong Arab-Israeli War, Israel had emerged as the victor. Palestinians were left without sovereignty, and seven hundred thousand fled or were forced out as refugees.

In 1967 Israel defeated its Arab neighbors once more in the Six-Day War, gaining control of several new territories, including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which have been under Israeli occupation ever since. To this day, the almost 4 million Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza remain stateless. Despite repeated peace talks, the conflict has continued. There has been loss and suffering on both sides: checkpoints, failed negotiations, suicide bombers, military strikes. Over the decades, mistrust between Israelis and Palestinians has deepened, and cynicism has grown.

For years Israeli author David Grossman has used his writing to shed light on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, seeking to humanize both sides. He has been called the “moral conscience



My Brother

David Grossman On The Conflict Between Israel And Palestine

photographs and interview by ANNA BLACKSHAW

of Israel,” and his fiction and nonfiction have been translated into twenty-five languages and have garnered many awards. He is also a committed peace activist and the head of Keshev, an organization that tracks the way Israeli and Palestinian media portray the conflict. He firmly believes in Israel as the Jewish homeland, but he is an outspoken critic of the Israeli government and its policies toward the people of Palestine. He has detractors on both sides but is also widely respected.

In 1983 Grossman published *The Smile of the Lamb* (Pica-

dor), the story of a young Israeli soldier serving in the West Bank who befriends an Arab storyteller. It was his first novel, and also the first novel written in Hebrew to depict Palestinian life. In 1988 Grossman wrote the nonfiction book *The Yellow Wind* (Picador), about Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip — an occupation that he has called “immoral.”

Grossman received international attention during the summer of 2006, when fighting broke out between Israeli soldiers and Hezbollah militias in Lebanon. Grossman initially

supported the Israeli Defense Forces, but as the conflict escalated and civilian casualties increased, he publicly urged his government to agree to a cease-fire and negotiations. Just two days later his twenty-year-old son Uri, an Israeli tank commander, was killed in combat in southern Lebanon.

At the time of Uri's death, Grossman had been working on a novel about an Israeli soldier. Uri had been helping his father with the book, telling him stories about his experience serving in the West Bank. In the book the soldier's mother intuits that her son will be killed and tries to protect him. Grossman later said that writing the novel, which was recently published in Israel as *Until the End of the Land*, was his way of trying to protect his son.

Grossman's eulogy at Uri's funeral was published in newspapers and magazines around the world. In it he said, "We have to guard ourselves from . . . simplistic thinking, from the corruption that is cynicism, from the pollutions of the heart and the ill-treatment of humans, which are the biggest curse of those living in a disastrous region like ours."

Moved by the eulogy, I looked Grossman up when I visited Israel and Palestine as a freelance journalist earlier this year. On the day we were scheduled to meet, I awakened before dawn to photograph the Bethlehem checkpoint, where every day thousands of Palestinian men, women, and children begin lining up before sunrise to pass from the West Bank into Jerusalem. From there I went to the Western Wall and watched Jewish men, women, and children place their faces against the stone and pray. At each place I felt sorrow and wondered how such an intractable situation could ever be resolved. But that afternoon I observed a project that brought Jewish and Arab children together to learn about each other's cultures and religions, and I was reminded that the simplest acts of commonality — laughter, empathy, and play — are perhaps the best path to coexistence.

At sundown that day, I met Grossman at a Jerusalem cafe with spectacular views of the Tower of David, the Old City walls, and the Judean Desert. As we talked, the sand-colored hills turned amber, and I could understand why both Israelis and Palestinians cherish this land they call "home."

Blackshaw: You have said, "All of us, Israelis and Palestinians, are the children of this conflict, which has bequeathed us all the deformities of hatred and violence."

Grossman: If you are born into a conflict that has lasted for so many years, you live your life with an existential fear; you aren't sure that you are going to have a future. It has an effect on everything, including the way you raise your children. From the moment you have a child, you feel he is loaned to you, not given. It affects the way you look at other people, too. You suspect anyone who might be an enemy, and gradually you turn almost every "other" into an enemy, because this is how you are programmed.

I see this in the way we run our government in Israel and



DAVID GROSSMAN

the way we use our power. I see this in our tendency to deny the humanity of our enemies. And our enemies do the same thing to us. It is inevitable, almost. I mean, if you really want to fight someone, you have to dehumanize him; otherwise it would be too painful. You develop all kinds of distorted psychological mechanisms in order to function in this zone of occupation, of terror, of war.

Blackshaw: What is the role of literature in this context?

Grossman: Literature is one of the few places where we can allow ourselves to explore tenderness or sympathy for the other. The purpose of writing or reading literature is to experience life from the point of view of another person and to rid yourself of all your

defense mechanisms; they are useful and efficient when you are a warrior, but at a certain point this suit of armor infiltrates your inner organs. For the author, when you write a novel, you identify with your character; if that character is your enemy, you deliberately go against your survival instinct, because you want to understand how the other experiences life and regards you.

We have to be prepared for war in this region of the world. It's the most violent neighborhood on earth today. But at the same time I think it's essential for us, both as human beings and as Israelis, to see how our enemies read the text of this reality, because if we do not see reality from their point of view, we shall not detect the hesitant signs of peace and reconciliation that come up. And we, the Israelis, are missing them all the time. At almost every crossroads we have reached with the Palestinians, we were given the option to go the way of dialogue, peace, and trust, or the way of violence, and both sides have almost always chosen violence. And when we have gone the way of dialogue, we have done so in a violent, belligerent way. This is how we are trained. It is difficult to change the minds and hearts of people because, terrible to say, after so many years they feel secure in a war zone; they know how to function there and are reluctant to move to another zone, even if it's a more promising one. People get used to their deformity.

Achieving peace here is not only a matter of striking a political agreement or a military truce. You have to change the hearts of the people and make them realize what is in their own best interest. But it is desperately difficult to do this, and it gets harder all the time.

Blackshaw: It's difficult for many people in the U.S. to understand why the problem between the Israelis and the Palestinians is so intractable. Here's the basic story line that is conveyed: The Palestinians and the Jews both lived here a long time ago, but then the Jews were forced out. The Jews spread around the world and suffered discrimination and ultimately genocide. They came back to the land they were from, where the Palestinians still lived. Is this story line correct, or is there a better way to understand the conflict?

Grossman: It is hard to summarize such a complicated

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history in a few words. Your description is true in general, but of course each side in the conflict has its own narrative. It is truly the homeland of these two peoples. Many Jews were expelled from it and suffered a lot, and then there was the Shoah — or, in English, the “Holocaust.” But facts are not enough. If you want to understand the conflict, you have to feel it. You have to take the emotional point of view of both peoples: the fear, the despair, the lack of certainty about the future, the lack of confidence in other human beings. The Israelis have a feeling of existential solitude, of being different from any other nation, and a collective memory of having been persecuted for centuries. The Palestinians are a people who, in the last century, were crushed by many different occupations. Before the Israelis, they were under the occupation of the Turks, the Egyptians, the Jordanians. There is a heavy consequence of being subjugated for so many years: it breaks the spirit of the people.

We are talking about two peoples so heavily damaged and distorted by past and present traumas that they can no longer identify what their real interests are. And quite often they act against those interests just to cause some damage to the enemy. Both peoples need a long and deep process of recovery, and this recovery will not start until they have identities that are separate and not interwoven, identities that allow each other just to be and to start to build up their own nation without occupation, terror, or hatred. Only then will both of them start to recover and lead the lives that they deserve to live and have been deprived of for so long.

Blackshaw: Do you believe Palestinians and Jews will ever embark upon anything similar to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, where victims on both sides of the conflict testified publicly as to how they’d suffered, and perpetrators on both sides had the opportunity to ask for forgiveness?

Grossman: I really wish for that to happen, but we are still very far away from that. Three years ago, when the Israelis and the Palestinians were preparing to enter into negotiations, conductor Daniel Barenboim and I and dozens of other writers and musicians introduced an initiative calling for both sides to apologize for the injustices and crimes and atrocities that we’d inflicted on each other; to show empathy; to start the negotiation process by recognizing the pain and suffering of the other. From my contact with both Israelis and Palestinians, I

know how important it is for each party to feel that the other recognizes its wounds.

We knew when we proposed the initiative that it had no practical chance of succeeding, but sometimes you have to do things that are not practical, because in the climate of this conflict people have become too practical and sober; they are rotten with sobriety, to the extent that it paralyzes them. They don’t have any goodwill toward each other. They suspect any move the other makes is a trick, a gimmick, an attempt at manipulation. To counter this, I think it’s important to have some acquired naiveté. I’m not saying I’m a naive person; I am too old to be naive, and I have had some experiences in my life that forbid me to be naive. But I advocate acquired naiveté. That you say, *OK, I know all the limitations of human beings; I know the temptations of power; I know the temptation to do evil. And yet, if I believe only in these mechanisms, I will reproduce and regenerate only them.* I want to sow some seeds of goodwill in this conflict. If I treat my enemies as human beings — and I know that they are human beings, even when we fight them; they have names, and they have families exactly as we have — then I believe that these little seeds of hope will grow sometime in the future.

It is the nature of this situation that people on both sides see themselves as victims. They do not believe in their ability to change anything. They feel they are doomed to fight, to live by the sword and kill or be killed. But if you show people that they have an alternative, suddenly they are not victims. They see that there might be a way out, that this is not the only scenario.

Blackshaw: Are you suggesting that perhaps reconciliation does not have to wait until there is a peace process?

Grossman: No, I do not believe we can achieve a real reconciliation without solving the practical problems first, and even when the practical problems are solved, it will be many years before the wounds heal and the hatred goes away. It could be generations, the trauma is so deep. I also think that, even after there is peace, we shall continue to have terror and aggression between the two peoples, though perhaps on a more limited scale. Because if there is peace, it means that there was serious and painful compromise between the two peoples. And if there is a painful compromise, it means a lot of frustrated, angry, vengeful people on both sides who will try everything to shatter this fragile peace. We are in a kind of limbo; the two leaderships are paralyzed, and into this so-called vacuum all of the fanatics and extremists are pouring. We are two scarred peoples, distorted by years of violence. There is so much temptation to act in destructive ways, which are also self-destructive. There is such a thirst for power and revenge in both peoples. They have tried only once the way of peace — in the Oslo agreement in 1993, which failed — but they never tire of exploring violence, even though it leads only to more violence.

(end of excerpt)