

between right and right

Who are the good guys? That's what every well-meaning European, left-wing European, intellectual European, liberal European always wants to know, first and foremost. Who are the good guys in the film and who are the bad guys. In this respect Vietnam was easy: The Vietnamese people were the victims, and the Americans were the bad guys. The same with apartheid: You could easily see that apartheid was a crime and that the struggle for civil rights, for liberation and equality, and for human dignity was right. The struggle between colonialism and imperialism, on the one hand, and the victims of colonialism and

imperialism, on the other, seems relatively simple—you can tell the good guys from the bad. When it comes to the foundations of the Israeli-Arab conflict, in particular the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, things are not so straightforward. And I am afraid I am not going to make things any easier for you by saying simply: These are the angels, these are the devils; you just have to support the angels, and good will prevail over evil. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a Wild West movie. It is not a struggle between good and evil, rather it is a tragedy in the ancient and most precise sense of the word: a clash between right and right, a clash between one very powerful, deep, and convincing claim, and another very different but no less convincing, no less powerful, no less humane claim.

The Palestinians are in Palestine because Palestine is the homeland, and the only homeland, of the Palestinian people. In the same

way in which Holland is the homeland of the Dutch, or Sweden the homeland of the Swedes. The Israeli Jews are in Israel because there is no other country in the world that the Jews, as a people, as a nation, could ever call home. As individuals, yes, but not as a people, not as a nation. The Palestinians have tried, unwillingly, to live in other Arab countries. They were rejected, sometimes even humiliated and persecuted by the so-called Arab family. They were made aware in the most painful way of their “Palestinianness”; they were not wanted by Lebanese or Syrians, by Egyptians or Iraqis. They had to learn the hard way that they are Palestinians, and that’s the only country that they can hold on to. In a strange way the Jewish people and the Palestinian people have had a somewhat parallel historical experience. The Jews were kicked out of Europe; my parents were kicked out of Europe some seventy years ago. Just like the

Palestinians were first kicked out of Palestine and then out of the Arab countries, or almost. When my father was a little boy in Poland, the streets of Europe were covered with graffiti, “Jews, go back to Palestine,” or sometimes worse: “Dirty Yids, piss off to Palestine.” When my father revisited Europe fifty years later, the walls were covered with new graffiti, “Jews, get out of Palestine.”

People in Europe keep sending me wonderful invitations to spend a rosy weekend in a delightful resort with Palestinian partners, Palestinian colleagues, Palestinian counterparts, so that we can learn to know one another, to like one another, to drink a cup of coffee together, so that we realize that no one has horns and tails—and the trouble will go away. This is based on the widespread sentimental European idea that every conflict is essentially no more than a misunderstanding. A little group therapy, a touch of family

counseling, and everyone will live happily ever after. Well, first, I have bad news for you: Some conflicts are very real; they are much worse than a mere misunderstanding. And then I have some sensational news for you: There is no essential misunderstanding between Palestinian Arab and Israeli Jew. The Palestinians want the land they call Palestine. They have very strong reasons to want it. The Israeli Jews want exactly the same land for exactly the same reasons, which provides for a perfect understanding between the parties, and for a terrible tragedy. Rivers of coffee drunk together cannot extinguish the tragedy of two peoples claiming, and I think rightly claiming, the same small country as their one and only national homeland in the whole world. So, drinking coffee together is wonderful and I'm all for it, especially if it is Arabic coffee, which is infinitely better than Israeli coffee. But drinking coffee cannot do away with the trouble.

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