

January 22, 2024

The Paradox of Power

Reflections on Self-determination during the Second Nakba

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Despite the continuing tragedy in Gaza, the spirit of self-determination continues to blaze among the Palestinians. Young people across the world who rise in non-violent protest against the war are a potent force for truth and justice. This tide of dissent marks the dawn of a reckoning.

These verses in the 2,400-year-old text speak of the paradox of power: to use it unwisely is to get a result that is the very opposite of what one hoped. I say unwisely because according to the text, the prize one throws away has the three dimensions of wisdom, namely compassion, moderation, and humility. The exercise of power that lacks these dimensions is experienced by the one against whom it is directed as oppression. Any abuse of strength triggers a resistance and an insight borne out of grief. Thus, the *Tao Te Ching* says it is the sorrowing oppressed who gain the real prize, so carelessly thrown away by the attacker.

In writing these lines, its author, the Daoist sage Lao Tzu, traces the non-negotiable law of causality established by what the Eastern contemplative traditions call the Tao or Dharma. For this law says that in a situation of oppression, it is the “loser takes all”, because they have in their grief gained a precious, expansive, and deep humanity that the oppressor has lost.

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It is critical to bring to bear this insight from the *Tao Te Ching* on the slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza conducted by the Israeli army with the backing of the United States. Israel persists in continuing to bomb Gaza, without caring about the tens of thousands of innocents killed and the complete destruction of schools, hospitals, businesses, and basic infrastructure. What is obvious here is that Israel’s use of such unmitigated force has transcended the bounds of any legitimate self-defence in response to the Hamas attack on Israeli civilians. In fact, it has violated the Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians and potentially committed the crime of genocide under the Genocide Convention.

The Palestinians subjected to relentless and ever-increasing bombardment (including the use of white phosphorous that literally burns flesh off the bone), are more dogged in their resistance. Most of them feel that they have little to lose after decades of brutal Israeli occupation and will not let the deaths of their friends and families be in vain. Moreover, they have committed to resisting their oppression till the last man, woman, and child, because they are emboldened by a righteousness that can only come from having seen their adversary as morally compromised. And in this, they are steadily turning the tide of public opinion in their favour.

Reading Baldwin amidst a US-backed genocide

In his 1972 essay 'To be Baptised', the writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin explains this paradox of power with his characteristic perceptiveness. He is writing about America, but he could well be writing about Israel. Baldwin says, “But for power truly to feel itself menaced, it must somehow sense itself in the presence of another power – or, more accurately, an energy – which it has not known how to define and therefore does not really know how to control. For a very long time, for example, America prospered – or seemed to prosper: this prosperity cost millions of people their lives. Now, not even the people who are the most spectacular recipients of the benefits of this prosperity are able to endure these benefits: they can neither understand them nor do without them, nor can they go beyond them. Above all, they cannot, or dare not, assess, or imagine the price paid by their victims, or subjects, for this way of life, and so they cannot afford to know why the victims are revolting. They are forced, then, to the conclusion that the victims – the barbarians – are revolting against all established civilised values – which is both true and not true – and, in order to preserve these values, however stifling and joyless these values have caused their lives to be, the bulk of the people desperately seek out representatives who are prepared to make up in cruelty what both they and the people lack in conviction. This is a formula for a nation’s or a kingdom’s decline, for no kingdom can maintain itself by force alone.”

Tropes such as the one used by Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant describing the Palestinians as “human-animals” revolting against civilised and democratic values become the building blocks of Israelism.

Israelis who support and benefit from the occupation know deep down that the lifestyle they enjoy has cost hundreds of thousands of Palestinians their lives and homes. Its continued enjoyment will be built on the bodies of countless more. They cannot endure the guilt that this fact triggers in them. They must find another way of imagining Israel’s identity not as an oppressor but as a victim hounded on all sides by barbaric Arabs. Tropes such as the one used by Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant describing the Palestinians as “human-animals” revolting against civilised and democratic values become the building blocks of Israelism. This condition of deep denial forces Israelis to choose political representatives who perpetuate this macabre theatre of make-believe and whose end goal is the complete erasure of Palestinians.

In truth, the greatest threat the Palestinians pose to Israel isn’t their resistance but their existence, because it directly challenges Israel’s founding myth of immaculate conception.

Coming back to Baldwin, he says that this is a formula for a nation’s decline. No nation can maintain itself by force alone because force does not work the way Israel thinks it does. Dropping more than 65,000 tons of bombs on Gaza – causing three nuclear bombs’ worth of destruction – hasn’t revealed to the Palestinians the awesome strength of Israel. On the contrary, it has revealed the Benjamin Netanyahu government’s moral weakness and the panic that comes from it.

Here lies the paradox of power, because once the oppressed see this and their death toll continues to mount, their will to resist becomes indomitable and imbued with an unbending righteousness. In Baldwin’s words, the oppressed “having endured everything, know now that they can endure everything.”



Witnessing the moral bankruptcy of Israel’s right-wing government has given rise in the Palestinians to a prophetic realisation. Even if they can’t describe the shape of the future, it belongs to them. Even as their homes are razed and families are murdered, they have intuitively begun to birth a new morality to replace the moral vacuity of Netanyahu and his American abettors that is on public display. Millions all over the world sense a new moral order emerging and have taken to the streets in support. New alliances have formed amongst disparate groups – the young, the old, Jews, Arabs, queers, labour unions – not just in support of the Palestinian cause but to proclaim the death of the old moral order of the ruling elites and the emergence of a new order led by the oppressed.

At this stage, in the subconscious of the Israeli body politic, what they desire the most is not the land of the Palestinians, which they’ve already taken, but their moral courage and righteous struggle.

It's not just the Palestinians and their allies who know this truth. Somewhere buried in the recesses of Israel's body politic, a terrifying awareness lurks. An awareness that has realised that despite Israel's unrivalled military superiority, they are now in the presence of another kind of power whose mystery they cannot understand and against which they cannot win. Here, while Gaza is an open air prison for Palestinians, it is Israelis who are the real prisoners. By their own hand, every hour of their lives is imprisoned by the knowledge of what they have done.

The knowledge of this horrible truth is fracturing Israeli society. A split has emerged between a brave and moral minority who plead for reconciliation with the Palestinians and a majority that has descended into a dangerous madness. A madness that has forced them to come up with evermore fabulous tales of the Palestinian barbarity and Israeli victimhood – lies which they repeat fervently in the hope of not so much convincing the world, but themselves. At this stage, in the subconscious of the Israeli body politic, what they desire the most is not the land of the Palestinians, which they've already taken, but their moral courage and righteous struggle. To have this is, is to regain their humanity and to heal from their self-inflicted moral injuries. But it is the one thing they cannot have if they continue down this road to perdition.

Re-determining the Israeli self

The clue for Israelis to regain their humanity lies in a rethinking the slogan much bandied by Israeli and US politicians: “the Jewish people have a right to self-determination.” The dominant understanding of this right to self-determination is articulated by the 2018 Israeli Basic Law or the so-called Nation State Law, which stipulates that “the land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people, in which the State of Israel was established,” and that “the State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people, in which it fulfills its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination,” and finally that “the right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.”

Essentially, the Nation State Law conflates the individual and collective self-determination of Jews wherever they are in the world with a particular kind of Zionist vision of Israel. This conflation has become so pervasive that it was even affirmed by the US Congress' *H. Res. 894*, which said unequivocally that to challenge this Zionist understanding of Jewish self-determination is to be antisemitic. In the words of the House of Representatives, anti-Zionism is antisemitism.

At this juncture, it would behoove us to ask what exactly we mean by “self-determination.” The UN Charter, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights all recognise the right to self-determination of peoples. The Charter and the Covenants elaborate self-determination as a people freely determining their political status and pursuing their social, economic, and cultural development. From the perspective of international law, there are clearly many ways in which a people belonging to a particular faith or ethnicity can politically, socially, culturally, and economically determine for themselves. However, none of these international instruments clarify what constitutes the “self” that is being determined.

So, the freedom the determining self seeks is not a “freedom to” but a “freedom from”. Simply put, to be free “from” encumbrances on the self is to be free “to” live a fulfilling life.

Whether in legal or common usage, when we speak of self-determination, we aren't really speaking of a self. That self is taken as a given. What we are really speaking of is a kind of sovereignty or, to be more precise, freedom for this self. And this freedom is not positive but negative. To elaborate, there are innumerable positive choices free selves can engage in, but a limited number of negative restrictions can stymie this choice. So, the freedom the determining self seeks is not a “freedom to” but a “freedom from.” Simply put, to be free “from” encumbrances on the self is to be free “to” live a fulfilling life.

This is precisely where we encounter a problem. In seeking to understand what encumbers the self, we can no longer take the self as a given. What seems to encumber us gives us an insight into who we really are.

In one of his interviews, Baldwin makes an insightful observation. He says, “There is no prospect of setting the Negro free unless one is prepared to set the white people in America free.” Baffled by Baldwin's remark, his interlocutor asks, “Free from what?” To which Baldwin replies, “Free from their terrors, free from their ignorance, free from their prejudices and free, really, from the right to do wrong, knowing that it is wrong.”

The same could be said of self-determination of the Jews in Israel. That the true freedom they seek is freedom from their terrors, ignorance, and prejudices. Because the way they live now is no way to live. Israelis can't possibly deny the moral injury and

psychological violence they experience when they bomb hospitals and schools and kill innocent children. Coming to think of it, while the slogan “Free Palestine” seeks political freedom for Palestinians, its hidden gift is that it offers Israelis a moral freedom that has eluded them.

Towards a truer self

Regarding self-determination, the truth is that the self isn't an empty vessel into which we can add whatever ethnonationalist or racist content we like. We don't create a self as much as discover it. And once we discover it, our efforts of self-determination are all about staying true to it. This means that not all political, cultural, social, and economic choices are equally valid just because a group of people have chosen it in their exercise of self-determination. There are some choices that are true to the essential nature of the self, and there are others that violate or go against this nature. Hence national political choices of a majority that discriminate against a particular indigenous population or economic decisions that deprive an ethnic group of its land cannot be true self-determination.

If Israelis experience a sense of fear, prejudice, or hatred towards Palestinians, then their self-determination doesn't lie in bombing the Palestinians out of existence. If anything, this will deepen their sense of limitation of selfhood.

We discover the true self by noticing what it pushes against or eschews. Like the *Tao*, the point isn't so much to create it but to align with it. Take, for example, fear, prejudice, and hatred. They make us feel constricted. And because this sense of constriction is so antithetical to the self, we have the desperate urge to rid ourselves of it. If living with fear, prejudice, and hatred was a part of our natural state, we'd just accept it and get on with our lives. But we don't. We instead embark on a course of action that may involve attacking or containing or erasing whoever it is we imagine is causing this constriction. Ironically, these very actions deepen the sense of constriction, causing more fear, more prejudice, and more hatred and creating a vicious cycle of relentless torment.

The self in its truest sense is free. As the *Tao* says, “To know what endures is to be openhearted.” The true self is openhearted and free from fear, prejudice, and hatred. It is already so and the only determining we need to do is to notice when this natural sense of freedom feels constricted. Once we notice it, we should embark on a course of action that affirms qualities that counteract this constriction instead of augmenting it. If Israelis experience a sense of fear, prejudice, or hatred towards Palestinians, then their self-determination doesn't lie in bombing the Palestinians out of existence. If anything, this will deepen their sense of limitation of selfhood. The history of Israel has shown time and again that discrimination and violence against Palestinians hasn't made Israelis any freer or happier.

The right course of action for the self-determination of Israelis would be to engage in acts that promote peace, understanding, and love, starting with ending the occupation and recognising equal rights of Jews and Arabs. It is precisely these qualities of expansiveness that are the true self and consequently act as medicine against any sense of constriction wrought by fear, prejudice, and hatred. From this perspective, there can be no truer act of self-determination than responding to our fear, prejudices, and hatred with fierce love, genuine openness, and a commitment to just peace.

Self-realisation as self-determination: A Gandhian approach

In a 1938 communique responding to letters received by him to declare his views about the Arab-Jew question in Palestine, M.K. Gandhi begins by expressing that his sympathies lie with the Jews. He recalls his close Jewish friends in South Africa and then compares the horrific discrimination against Jews by Christian Europe to the discrimination experienced by Dalits at the hands of caste Hindus. However, on the question of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, he notes that his sympathy does not blind him to the requirements of justice.

Gandhi goes on to say that he has no doubt that the Zionist approach to establishing an ethnonationalist state by dispossession of the Arabs is unjust. In Gandhi's words, “the Palestine of the biblical conception is not a geographical tract. It is in their [Jews'] hearts. But if they must look to the Palestine of geography as their national home, it is wrong to enter it under the shadow of the British gun. A religious act cannot be performed with the aid of the bayonet or the bomb. Jews can settle in Palestine only by the goodwill of the Arabs. They should seek to convert the Arab heart. The same God rules the Arab heart who rules the Jewish heart.”

Gandhi deployed satyagraha as a method of self-determination in the struggle for Indian independence against the British. Its success inspired civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King to use it in their struggle in America.

Gandhi first developed satyagraha as an approach to self-determination in South Africa in 1906 to resist discriminatory pass laws imposed on the South African Indian community. In Gandhi's words, "Its [satyagraha] root meaning is 'holding on to truth', hence 'Truth-force'. It can also be called 'Love-force' or 'Soul-force'. In the application of satyagraha, I discovered that the pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent but that he must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy." Gandhi on his return to India deployed satyagraha as a method of self-determination in the struggle for Indian independence against the British. Its success inspired civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King to use it in their struggle in America.

Nearly 50 years after Gandhi first used this method, King in his famous 1968 "I have a dream" speech refers to "soul force" by saying, "we must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force." While Gandhi was clear about how satyagraha was influenced by the example of Jesus Christ, King noted that prior to reading Gandhi, he had concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships. He says, "Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale."

Satyagraha as a method of "self-determination" is more specifically a method of "self-realisation." For Gandhi, true self-determination is self-realisation. Truth, love, and soul are all synonyms that Gandhi uses when he refers to the self. For Gandhi, the true self is relational and at the same time universal. It is universal in the sense that the self is Truth, Love or God, it is all encompassing. Hence his remark that the "same God rules the Arab heart who rules the Jewish heart". It is relational however because the realisation of the oneness of the self can only occur via loving and serving its multiple manifestations, the Jew, the Arab, the Christian. In Gandhi's words, "I do not believe that an individual may gain spiritually, and those that surround him suffer [...] I believe in the essential unity of all lives. Therefore, I believe if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent."

The "self" that melts away through acts of selfless service towards those most in need is the false self or the egotistical self. It is also the false self that sometimes becomes too much, full of self-centered desires and aversions.

What is clear to see is that Gandhi's notion of self differs greatly from the commonly accepted atomistic conception of self where each individual self is hermetically sealed and endlessly malleable based on an individual's desires. Gandhi elaborates on the relational self in practice in one of his letters to a friend tormented by self-doubt, "I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, try the following expedient: Recall the face of the poorest and the most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj or self-rule for the hungry and also spiritually starved millions of our countrymen? Then you will find your doubts and your-self melting away."

The "self" that melts away through acts of selfless service towards those most in need is the false self or the egotistical self. It is also the false self that sometimes becomes too much, full of self-centred desires and aversions and believes that its self-determination can occur by denying others their rights. Satyagraha then is a method of self-determination that involves the relentless quest to realise the truth (self) and Gandhi's approach to it is through ahimsa or non-violence and *tapasya* or spiritual purification through overcoming self-centredness.

Dialogue as self-determination: Martin Buber's I and thou

In 1939, Martin Buber, the Austrian-Jewish and Israeli philosopher and teacher, wrote a letter to Gandhi, responding to the latter's communique on Palestine. Buber, despite his deep admiration of satyagraha, was critical of Gandhi's take on the question of Palestine being a Jewish homeland. In a long letter, where he takes issue with several of Gandhi's prescriptions, Buber also sought to clarify why his understanding of Zionism differed significantly from how Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, viewed it.

In Buber's words to Gandhi, "But you say [...] that Palestine belongs to the Arabs and that it is therefore 'wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs.' Here I must add a personal note [...] I belong to a group of people who, from the time when Britain conquered Palestine, have not ceased to strive for the achievement of genuine peace between Jew and Arab. By genuine peace, we inferred and still infer that both peoples should together develop the Land without one imposing his will on the other [...] for we love this land, and we believe in its future, and, seeing that such love and such faith are surely present on the other side as well, a union in

the common service of the Land must be within the range of the possible. Where there is faith and love, a solution may be found even to what appears to be a tragic contradiction.”

While Buber was committed to the land of Palestine as a home for Jews, his version of Zionism foregrounded the spiritual and cultural renaissance of Judaism. It wasn't about building the ethnonationalist state of Israel. Buber ardently believed in a binational solution in Palestine where both Jews and Arabs had equal rights and lived peacefully and harmoniously with each other. Buber's worldview is famously encapsulated in his statement, “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanely, God is the electricity that surges between them.”

The self of the “I-It” mode is an alienated self, anxiously but unsuccessfully seeking to determine itself via succumbing to endless desires and aversions.

In his 1914 essay 'With a Monist', Buber brought forth an idea of a dialogic self that has echoes of the kind of self that Gandhi addresses in satyagraha. Buber says, “The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable: through the embracing of one of its beings.”

Buber later developed the idea of embracing the world in his path-breaking 1923 work 'I and Thou'. For Buber, the truest experience of God arises from a dialogue between the self and other (I and thou). The real self for Buber is dialogical, and for this to be realised we need to move from the sphere of “I-It” to “I-Thou”. Buber argued that the “I-It” mode of being (which he also calls experience) objectifies other beings by perceiving them as a collection of qualities. It is transactional and utilitarian. In the “I-It” modality, the I is the only subject and the world and all its contents are objects to be analysed, categorised, and utilised. The self of the “I-It” mode is an alienated self, anxiously but unsuccessfully seeking to determine itself via succumbing to endless desires and aversions.

The true self for Buber emerges in the “I-Thou” mode of being (which he calls encounter). Here others are not a collection of objects, but a community of subjects and the self is not insular and separate but relational and in continuous dialogue with everything else. The I in the “I-Thou” mode comes alive in a relationship and through this living and vibrant relationship, both the self and the other is transformed. The thou or the other be it a human, an animal or a tree is not fixed in time and space but encountered as the whole of Life itself, and this kind of encounter in its truest sense can be called Love because neither the self or the other is objectified and fixed.

Buber's true self resonates deeply with Gandhi's understanding of the self. At the end of his autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi describes his version thus, “To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself.”

Not a two-state solution but a binational one

Buber's spirituality was central to his politics. For him, a Zionism that sought the self-determination of Jewish people without centering the “I-Thou” self was a Zionism that lacked a moral centre and doomed to fail. It was an “I-It” way of being in the world. Buber, like Gandhi, refused to separate the political self from the ethical self. He believed that an “I-It” kind of Zionism that focused on the formation of a Jewish state at all costs would destroy both Zionism and Judaism.

The similarities between the Gandhian and Buberian notions of self-determination extended to how it informed their visions for statehood. For both, statehood for its own sake based on an ethnic or religious identity accompanied by trappings of government, military, and laws is hollow.

In 1949, one year after the official Zionist policy achieved its goal of a Jewish state, Buber in a letter prophetically warned of things to come, “And when this hollow peace is achieved, how then do you think you'll be able to combat ‘the spirit of militarism’ when the leaders of the extreme nationalism will find it easy to convince the young that this kind of spirit is essential for the survival of the country? The battles will cease – but will suspicions cease? Will there be an end to the thirst for vengeance? Won't we be compelled, and I mean really compelled, to maintain a posture of vigilance forever, without being able to breathe? Won't this unceasing effort occupy the most talented members of our society? Yes, a goal has been reached, but it is not called Zion. [The] day will yet come when the victorious march of which our people is so proud today will seem to us like a cruel detour.”

The wounds of partition

The fundamental similarities between the Gandhian and Buberian notions of self-determination extended to how it informed their visions for statehood. For both, statehood for its own sake based on an ethnic or religious identity accompanied by trappings of government, military, and laws is hollow if it lacked a moral core and a mission higher than just being a state. Gandhi during the Indian independence struggle worked unceasingly towards a vision of India where both Hindus and Muslims lived in peace and harmony. He tried to do everything in his power to oppose the Muslim League's demand for the creation of Pakistan, a separate state for Indian Muslims. Gandhi went so far as to say, "I am firmly convinced that the Pakistan demand as put forth by the Muslim League is un-Islamic and I have not hesitated to call it sinful. Islam stands for the unity and brotherhood of mankind, not for disrupting the oneness of the human family. Therefore, those who want to divide India into possibly warring groups are enemies alike of India and Islam."

However, once Britain partitioned India and Pakistan, Gandhi, horrified by the displacement of fourteen million people and a carnage resulting in the death of another two million, resigned himself to the two-state solution with a heavy heart. In 1948, the year Palestine was partitioned and Israel was created, a Hindu nationalist assassinated Gandhi, accusing his techniques of satyagraha of contributing to Muslim appeasement, which eventually led to India's partition. The sobering lesson from the partition is that seven decades after the partition of India, people on both sides of the border are still dealing with the intergenerational trauma. It seems like the partition never ended and its festering wound continues to infect the body politic of India and Pakistan fomenting communal hatred and violence on both sides of the border.

Despite this travesty and with all the handwringing by politicians and media about how complicated the conflict is, there are few efforts towards a genuine and just rapprochement between Jews and Arabs.

Like Gandhi, Buber too had to witness the demise of his cosmopolitan, humanistic, binational vision of a Palestine where Jews and Arabs shared equal rights and lived in harmony. He continued to advocate for this till the eve of the Israel's statehood. In his 1947 essay 'Two Peoples in Palestine', Buber elaborated on what his kind of self-determination would look like. He said, "What is really needed by each of the two-peoples living one alongside another, and one within the other, in Palestine is self-determination, autonomy, the chance to decide for itself. But this most certainly does not mean that each is in need of a state in which it will be sovereign. The Arab population does not need an Arab state in order to develop its potential freely, nor does the Jewish population need a Jewish state to accomplish its purpose. Its realisation on both sides can be guaranteed within the framework of a joint bi-national socio-political entity."

State vs homeland

The 7 October Hamas attack on Israel that killed around 1,140 Israelis kicked off the Israeli retaliation. According to the latest report by the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, the Israeli offensive has, till the time of writing this, killed approximately 30,000 Palestinians civilians including 11,422 children, 5,822 women, 481 health personnel, and 101 journalists and rendered nearly 2 million people homeless. Despite this travesty and with all the handwringing by politicians and media about how complicated the conflict is, there are few efforts towards a genuine and just rapprochement between Jews and Arabs.

History and our present times show that the Israeli government's brand of revisionist Zionism that relies on the protection of American imperial power is unsustainable. It breeds ever increasing violent responses from Hamas. The tit-for-tat wars that ensue cost the lives of untold numbers of innocent civilians on both sides. The Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt with her characteristic clairvoyance predicted this situation as early as 1944. Arendt was horrified by the winning out of Revisionist Zionism in the World Zionist Organisation. The American chapter of the Organisation had adopted a resolution calling for a Jewish state covering the entire territory of Palestine, without any division or reduction. She responded with an article 'Zionism Reconsidered', where she stated that this is a "turning point in Zionist history; for it means that the Revisionist program, so long bitterly repudiated, has proved finally victorious ... the Arabs were simply not mentioned in the resolution, which obviously leaves them the choice between voluntary emigration or second-class citizenship."

Arendt went on to say, 'Nationalism is bad enough when it trusts in nothing but the rude force of the nation. A nationalism that necessarily and admittedly depends upon the force of a foreign nation is certainly worse. This is the threatened fate of Jewish nationalism and of the proposed Jewish State, surrounded inevitably by Arab states and Arab peoples. Even a Jewish majority in Palestine – nay, even a transfer of all Palestine Arabs, which is openly demanded by Revisionists —would not substantially change a situation in which Jews must either ask protection from an outside power against their neighbours or effect a working agreement with their neighbours.'

Arendt predicted, “And even if Jews were to win the war, its end would find the unique possibilities and the unique achievements of Zionism in Palestine destroyed.”

Arendt’s vision of a Jewish homeland in its truest sense was the collective outcome of the self-determination of Buber’s dialogic self. It was very different from the kind of self-determination whose outcome is not a homeland but a nation state. When the war was raging in 1948 between the Jews and the Arabs, Arendt made a prediction of the dangers of Jewish self-determination that is centred on building an ethnocentric state. This prediction, like the kind of prophetic statements Baldwin made about America, has come to pass today. Tragically Israeli and American politicians and western media for all their talk about ‘the day after Gaza’, or what happens when Israel achieves its military ‘objectives’, deep down know this truth, but won’t dare admit it even to themselves.

Arendt predicted, “And even if Jews were to win the war, its end would find the unique possibilities and the unique achievements of Zionism in Palestine destroyed. The land that would come into being would be something quite other than the dream of world Jewry, Zionist and non-Zionist. The ‘victorious’ Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population, secluded inside ever-threatened borders, absorbed with physical self-defence to a degree that would submerge all other interests and activities.”

Self-determining our way to wholeness

Sometimes one speaks of true self-determination not because one isn’t aware of how hard it is but because it is the only way to wholeness. One also speaks of true self-determination not because one hasn’t tried its alternatives, but precisely because these alternatives have shown us how wrong we were in the first place.

The history of the Indian subcontinent is ample proof that partition of peoples and land based on a constricted understanding of the Self and Other has only led to greater bloodshed. Worse, it led to two nuclear armed neighbours perpetually at each other’s throats and ordinary people on both sides who share so much in common wondering about the tragic pointlessness of it all. The partition of India and its aftermath is a cautionary tale for Israel and Palestine.

The first step to healing in the Middle East is to think about Jewish and Arab self-determination through a Buberian “I-Thou” modality. Arendt’s proposal even if made in the 1940s still offers a lasting solution for peace. Her recommendation to the UN was to “summon up the courage in this unprecedented situation to take an unprecedented step by going to those Jewish and Arab individuals who at present are isolated because of their records as sincere believers in Arab-Jewish cooperation and ask them to negotiate a truce.”

Thereafter in the spirit of binationalism, Arendt backed one of the Ihud proposals offering a federated system as an alternative to the nation-state. Arendt writes of the Ihud proposal that “even though it establishes a common government of two different peoples, it avoids the majority-minority constellation, which is insoluble by definition. A federated structure would have to rest on Jewish-Arab community councils, which would mean that Jewish-Arab conflict would be resolved on the lowest and most promising level of proximity and neighborliness.” Conflict resolution between Jews and Arabs at the level of greatest proximity and neighborliness (and not at the level of national politicians and imperial powers) would in fact be realising the dialogic self in practice.

“This war and the way of wars has achieved nothing. The way of the Israeli right wing of using one war after another, of using military power to achieve change has achieved only destruction and death and killing of innocent people.”

Arendt’s proposal of a federated system was like Gandhi’s vision of gram swaraj (self-rule at the level of the village). Arendt fleshed out her proposal by detailing that “local self-government and mixed Jewish-Arab municipal and rural councils on a small scale and as numerous as possible are the only realistic political measures that can eventually lead to the political emancipation of Palestine. It is still not too late.”

Indeed, it is still not too late. Even as this is being written, hundreds of Israelis are non-violently taking to the streets in Tel Aviv as the part of the largest peace rally since Israel began its attack on Gaza. Protesters are calling for an immediate ceasefire and the release of hostages. Standing Together, a Jewish-Arab peace coalition, stated that “this war and the way of wars has achieved nothing. The way of the Israeli right wing of using one war after another, of using military power to achieve change has achieved only destruction and death and killing of innocent people. So, we are here sounding a voice of a different path of independence, of equality, of freedom for all, a path for Israeli and Palestinian peace.”

Across the US, thousands of members of the Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) along with other groups have taken to the streets every week since October calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to the occupation. Through their actions of civil disobedience, the JVP is carrying on the long, proud and sacred legacy of Jewish activists who strive for peace, speak truth to power, and stand up for justice. The JVP’s vision of Jewish self-determination encapsulates Buber’s “I-Thou” heart of Judaism and Arendt’s idea of a homeland for the Jewish people.

On their website they paint an inspiring picture of their vision that is nothing short of holy, and bears reproducing here in whole, “We picture the concrete of the Apartheid wall in pieces on free Palestinian soil. We picture Israeli jails, prisons, and detention centers emptied and dismantled. We picture the return of Palestinian refugees, reuniting with their families and communities. We picture Palestinians – from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea – living with their inalienable rights respected, building schools and hospitals and planting olive groves with the resources they need. We imagine Jewish Israelis released from conscripted violence against Palestinians, free from dehumanising others which in turn diminishes their own humanity. We imagine Jewish Israelis joining Palestinians to build a just society, rooted in equality rather than supremacy, dignity rather than domination, democracy rather than dispossession – a society where every life is precious.”

More and more young Americans are waking up from the delusion of the false self and becoming satyagrahis. They are non-violently protesting in their cities and towns, boycotting companies supporting human rights abuses.

The spirit of true self-determination still burns strong and will only get stronger. Given that the US government is the primary sponsor and abettor of the unfolding genocide in Gaza, it is incumbent on all Americans (not only Israelis) to deeply reflect on the betrayal of their true self by sponsoring endless wars the world over. More and more young Americans are waking up from the delusion of the false self and becoming satyagrahis (even if they don’t describe themselves as such). They are non-violently protesting in their cities and towns, boycotting companies supporting human rights abuses, writing to their elected representatives calling for an end to violence. Some of them are doing this at great personal cost due to the culture of silence and fear in their workplaces on anything that is critical of the status quo.

This is just the beginning. The movement is growing by the day. How can it not? As the *Tao Te Ching* says regarding the paradox of power and the futility of brute force, “Compassion wins the battle and holds the fort; it is the bulwark set around those heaven helps.”

Kabir Bavikatte is contemplative by disposition and expresses his insights through activism, coaching, teaching and writing.