

Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, “The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History”

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Professors Bashir Bashir (Department of Sociology, Political Science, and Communication at the Open University of Israel and Senior Research Fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute) and Amos Goldberg (Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) are co-editors of a volume that explores the fraught relationship between the Holocaust and the Nakba. Their book challenges the dichotomous approach to these national traumas and proposes the construction of a new narrative that recognizes the foundational importance of these events to both Jewish and Palestinian history: the near total extermination of European Jewry during the Holocaust followed by the expulsion of the Palestinian population upon the creation of the state of Israel during the Nakba (the catastrophe).

Every national trauma is unique and there is no gradation for suffering, nonetheless societies must find ways to promote peace in order to create a violence-free world. The narratives of the Holocaust and the Nakba share salient features such as a binary opposition that is characteristic of structuralist semiotics. Both events are relevant to the struggle against racism and can be situated in a broader postcolonial context in which the Holocaust is in conflict with Palestinian anticolonialism. The foundational stories of the Jews and Palestinians are fundamentally in opposition, but they also serve as a focal point for the global clash between two metanarratives.

Bashir and Goldberg propose a totally different syntax and grammar of history and memory, in which the combination of “Holocaust and Nakba” or “Nakba and Holocaust” makes historical, cultural and political sense.

Borrowing from the theoretical works of Dominic La Carpa, the authors apply the concept of “empathic unsettlement,” which they revise and apply to the Israel/Palestine conflict. Bashir and Goldberg argue that this approach could be pivotal for new ethnical-political grammar that helps Jews and Palestinians to recognize and understand the traumatic and seminal suffering of the other and at the same time be aware of their radical and unsettling otherness. This task is ambitious and challenging, as both the Holocaust and the Nakba continue to be deeply traumatic for both groups. While the Holocaust gives credence to the importance of Jewish self-determination, many Palestinians, in and outside of Israel, continue to live in terrible conditions, as a result of the Nakba and subsequent removals. Bashir and Goldberg argue that there is an "asymmetrical context" for the conflict as Palestinians share no responsibility for the Holocaust, but the 1948 War of Independence resulted in the Nakba. Trying to put these dichotomous narratives into dialogue, they propose “three different registers”, cultural, historical, and ethico-political. A potential historical reconciliation may open communication between the two narratives and offer a place to begin walking towards each other.

Bashir and Goldberg propose bi-nationalism as a way to recognize the right of national self-determination for both national groups. They maintain that this right not be realized in the form of an exclusive ethnic state rather bi-nationalism could be achieved by various forms of governing politics, including federation or confederation of a parallel state structure and/or a

cooperative, overlapping, interlinked two-state structure. By recommending a new grammar for understanding and discussing the Holocaust and Nakba, which is a pioneering concept in narratives surrounding national traumas, they take an important step forward. Although their work does not introduce practical solutions, they establish the groundwork for scholars and policy makers to move toward a peaceful future.

Diana Hayrapetyan