

Happy Independence Day wishes from a Palestinian

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Although Palestinian and Israeli narratives are different, our vision for the future can be one.

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It might be hard to believe that a Palestinian would wish an Israeli Jew a happy Independence Day, but I am only following in the footsteps of another Palestinian I know, Ibrahim from Hebron.

Three years ago, I was cohosting a bilingual (Arabic and Hebrew) radio show at Radio All for Peace in Jerusalem with my Israeli cohost, Sharon Misheiker. Our weekly show happened to air on Israeli Independence Day, and on that day we invited Ibrahim, a peace activist, to talk about the land that had been confiscated from him for the building of the separation barrier.

I remember that Ibrahim spoke with compelling passion and heartbreaking emotions about the loss of his farmland, which had been a main source of income. Before ending the conversation, we asked him how he felt about Independence Day, and we received a surprising answer.

With his characteristic candor, Ibrahim told us that he had already called his Israeli friends and wished them a happy Independence Day.

Sharon and I were shocked.

Ibrahim told us that he received the same response from all his Israeli friends: silence, shock and disbelief. They didn't know what to say. They were caught by surprise. They had never heard a Palestinian wishing them a happy Independence Day.

Some of his left-wing friends asked how he could do so, when the holiday was celebrating the same event that was causing much of his suffering. He could have used that chance to recount history according to the Palestinian narrative: He could have said something about the Deir Yasin massacre, or the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who were left homeless after 1948 war. But he didn't. Instead, Ibrahim simply said happy Independence Day, and in doing so took the first step toward building a different kind of relationship between Israelis and Palestinians.

WHY WAS this step important? Part of the Israeli narrative describes a long history of suffering which hit the highest point with the Holocaust and the fear that Arabs would drive the Jews into the sea.

For years, Israelis have heard that Palestinians would never accept Israel's existence and would always work to destroy it. Many Israelis don't believe that Palestinians accept the reality that we are stuck here together. They doubt that Palestinians also dream of a peaceful tomorrow, where freedom prevails and safety is realized. This narrative of pain and fear has captured the minds of Jews, even though Israel has developed one of the strongest militaries in the world.

When Ibrahim uttered the words "happy Independence Day," he challenged that narrative of fear and doubt, and assured his Israeli friends that he knows they are here to stay, and accepts that. He wanted to let them know that he is not waiting for a chance to strike back. In essence, Ibrahim was digging a grave for the

narrative of fear and replacing it with a narrative of hope.

For all of us, the past is painful and our narratives are very real to us. For the Palestinians, our pain of the Nakba is still fresh. The lost olive groves, orange groves, vineyards and homes which are part of the Palestinian identity and heritage, the stories, poetry and songs of Palestinian life in what became Israel will always be there.

These are collective memories that will always be carved in the heart of every Palestinian. But memories, pain and longing do not have to lead to revenge and destruction: They can also be motivation for a new tomorrow.

When Ibrahim's friends asked him how they should respond to his wishes, Ibrahim had a simple answer. He asked them to wish .

Although Palestinian and Israeli narratives are different, our vision for the future can be one. We can all unite and work toward the overdue dream of a viable Palestinian state before it is too late. It is time for our people to not let the past rob us of our future, but rather let it motivate us toward actions of hope.

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