[The Nakba and the Holocaust: A Conversation with Bashir Bashir](http://nakbafiles.org/2016/06/27/the-nakba-and-the-holocaust-a-conversation-with-bashir-bashir/%22%20%5Co%20%22The%20Nakba%20and%20the%20Holocaust%3A%20A%20Conversation%20with%20Bashir%20Bashir)

June 27, 2016

The Nakba Files, ADALAH - Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel

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The Israeli Holocaust museum Yad Vashem. Located on an adjacent hill are the remains of Dayr Yassin, site of a massacre of Palestinians by Zionist forces during the Nakba (photo by Godot13)

How can one think productively about the Holocaust and the Nakba together? Political theorist [Bashir Bashir](http://www.vanleer.org.il/en/people/bashir-bashir) argues that confronting this question is necessary in order to develop a new approach to decolonization in Israel/Palestine. Bashir is co-editor, along with historian Amos Goldberg, of the recently released Hebrew volume, [The Holocaust and the Nakba: Memory, National Identity and Jewish-Arab Partnership](http://www.vanleer.org.il/en/publication/holocaust-and-nakba-memory-national-identity-and-jewish-arab-partnership) (ha-Shoʼah veha-nakbah: zikaron, zehut leʼumit ve-shutafut Yehudit-ʻArvit). Bashir agreed to discuss the project of engaging the Holocaust and Nakba together in a recent interview with The Nakba Files. Below is a condensed version of the conversation.

What were the origins and goals of this book?

This book has a long and interesting history. It originated in efforts to bring schoolteachers — Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel — to the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute to discuss the Holocaust, and I was one of the speakers in the program.  The project generated several challenges that were raised by Palestinian speakers like me and Palestinian teachers. This project and the challenges it raised inspired Amos Goldberg, the academic director of the project, and I to do an academic volume. When we decided to do this book, my condition was that it needed to address not just the Holocaust, but the Holocaust and the Nakba together. If you are in the Israeli context and you want to discuss the Holocaust with Jewish and Palestinian teachers, it is entirely flawed to do so without intimately connecting the Holocaust and the Nakba, since the institutions of the state treat the Holocaust as an exceptional and unique event, instrumentalizing it to defend the hegemony of Zionism. My view is that any consistent and morally defensible Jewish Israeli ethical politics must engage with the Nakba and its ongoing consequences.

So the idea was to address this connection: what are the possibilities of putting the Holocaust and Nakba into a single conversation? What are the sensitivities, the “explosive materials,” so to speak? What opportunities does this enable for thinking about decolonization based on Arab-Jewish partnership? Of course we knew we were touching a very sensitive issue and there are different views on this, including our own views. These issues are highly charged and constitutive of people’s feelings, identities, and consciousness, their conceptions of history and memory. We were keen on having a wide spectrum of views in the book, including those who are hostile to the very idea of invoking Holocaust and Nakba in same context.

From my point of view, it is absolutely critical to stress that we are not presenting some kind of binary equating the two phenomena, nor is this an attempt at some kind of empty “dialogue” that papers over asymmetries of power in Israel/Palestine. Indeed, there are at least three crucial asymmetries that come out of discussing the Holocaust and Nakba together. First, obviously the Holocaust and the Nakba are not the same thing: yes, genocide and ethnic cleansing are part of a continuum, but they are not the same thing. Second, Palestinians are not responsible for the Holocaust but the Zionist movement and the state of Israel are very much responsible for the Nakba. Third, the Holocaust is largely a past, albeit a very important and traumatic one whereas the Nakba is an ongoing reality for Palestinians.

We need to put the Holocaust and the Nakba together in a historical context tied to phenomena such as colonialism, nationalism, state-building, and ethnic cleansing. For the Holocaust, it is especially crucial to demystify, historicize, and contextualize this event, to respect its dimensions as a man-made event without denying its murderous, disastrous and genocidal scale. And also to recognize that it was not perpetrated against Jews alone, but also against Roma, homosexuals, and the disabled. Zionism tries to treat the Holocaust as both universal and particular: it is supposed to be significance to all of humanity, but it is also the patrimony of Zionism, which has the right to decide how it is invoked and understood. Putting the Holocaust and the Nakba together in a common frame disrupts this exceptionalism and is meant to provoke new thinking that exceeds the rigid, dichotomous, and oppositional boundaries of ethno-nationalism.

If your message to Israeli Jews is that discussing the Holocaust requires grappling with the Nakba, what is your message to Palestinians about the Holocaust?

I still do not have a comprehensively articulated account of how Palestinians should address the Holocaust, given that they were not responsible for it. But the existing intertwined and binational realities, though asymmetrical, in Israel/Palestine, colonialism, irony and moral considerations, have rendered Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews inseparable. That is partly why I see the Holocaust and Nakba as interconnected in the past, present and future of Israel/Palestine. This doesn’t come without numerous challenges. On the one hand, we Palestinians must express an uncompromising and consistent human empathy in the face of mass murder like the Holocaust, as is the case with other murderous crimes anywhere in the world. On the other hand, participating in the state’s rituals of Holocaust commemoration presents serious dilemmas. For example, when the sirens blare on Holocaust day in Israel, it is hard to bring Palestinians in Israel to participate in the ritual of standing silence, because many know that it is part and parcel of a larger monopolization and instrumentalization of the Holocaust that serves to justify the very serious discrimination, racism, and oppression exercised against them as Palestinians.

The relationship between the Holocaust and international law is an important and fraught one, especially in the debates around the Genocide Convention and the more general project of using international criminal law to address mass atrocities. Do you have any thoughts on how juxtaposing Holocaust and Nakba helps us rethink the law?

I can think of three important ways in which considering the Holocaust and the Nakba together is relevant for legal issues. First, an engagement with the Nakba is needed to restore credibility to the project of international criminal justice, which owes so much to the history of the Holocaust and discussions around it. Juxtaposing the Nakba and the Holocaust is a reminder that mass atrocities — not only the Nakba, but others around the world — should not be ignored or marginalized in the service of empires, colonial or national orders, or geostrategic interests. Thus this juxtaposition has a pedagogical and democratizing impact epistemologically, historically, and politically.

Second, it is necessary to challenge the colonial legality that allows Israel to continue to perpetuate the Nakba, including laws that concern Palestinian refugees — be they the “internally displaced” Palestinians who lost their homes but remain citizens of the state of Israel or those in exile outside the boundaries of historic Palestine. We must also resist any attempt to liquidate or undermine the rights of the refugees; indeed, we should return to an understanding of Palestinian nationalism after the Nakba as a primarily exilic form of nationalism that is centered around a project of return and self-determination.

Third, we need to move beyond the scandalous and amnesic framework of “conflict resolution and peacemaking” between Zionism/the state of Israel and Palestinian nationalism/the PLO as manifested in the Oslo peace process and instead move toward a process of historical reconciliation. At the core of this reconciliation is, among other things, coming to terms with the Nakba which means securing from Israel recognition of the Zionist movement’s major responsibility for the Nakba and addressing the question of reparations for Palestinians.

What have been the reactions to the book so far?

Although it addresses issues of concern to all Palestinians, this book was meant primarily for a Hebrew-speaking audience. And I must say that the reaction from Israeli Jewish quarters — including colleagues who see themselves as critical of the state or as liberal Zionists — has ranged from negative to hostile, with some [exceptions](http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-25731). Some objected to the mere title of the book for putting the words “Holocaust” and “Nakba” together. This attempt to police the mere juxtaposition of these words is very telling and of course gets at the very reasons why we wanted to produce this book as a disruption to the dominant discourse in the first place.

The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, through which the book was published and where I serve as a research fellow, was flooded with angry phone calls and emails for several days and had to hire extra security for the book launch event. Several dozen protesters, mostly from the far-right group Im Tirtzu, staged a demonstration outside the building during the book launch.

What are your future plans for this work?

Because the book was intended for an Israeli audience, we didn’t have plans or resources to translate it, although we have been approached about an Italian translation. Instead, Amos and I are at work on an edited volume intended for English-speaking audiences, under the provisional title The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Conflicting Historical Traumas. The Hebrew book was “horizontal” in the sense that it sought to capture a wide range of views to start a conversation about the Holocaust and Nakba. This book will be “vertical”: its contributors all share the starting point that this conversation is necessary, which will enable them to address issues more deeply.

Both books are part of my own broader project, which argues that Palestinian nationalism is entering a new stage requiring a distinct moral and political grammar. A key part of this is engaging the relationship between Holocaust and Nakba. This isn’t entirely new: Ghassan Kanafani tried to do this, Elias Khoury tried it with Gate of the Sun and his new novel, Children of the Ghetto — My Name is Adam, as did the Jewish poet Avoth Yeshurun. This new grammar brings in the colonial dimension. This entails an awareness that the conflict cannot be framed entirely around partition; that the question of Palestine goes beyond merely statehood and must include a rethinking of the “self” in self-determination; and finally, the role of Israeli Jews. Zionism has managed to create a distinctively Israeli Jewish national identity and this historical and sociological fact must be reckoned with.

This leads us to the most important part of this new grammar, which is binationalism. Beyond the question of whether there will be two states or one, a decolonizing commitment to binationalism means that despite being the victims of Zionism we Palestinians must develop an inclusive, humanistic, form of politics that allows us to accommodate Israeli Jews in a democratic venture of togetherness. A productive and joint conversation on the Holocaust and the Nakba is a fundamental pillar of this venture.

For further reading: Bashir Bashir & Amos Goldberg, “[Deliberating the Holocaust and the Nakba: Disruptive Empathy and Binationalism in Israel/Palestine,](http://nakbafiles.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Bashir-Goldberg-Deliberating-the-Holocaust-and-the-Nakba-JGR.pdf)” Journal of Genocide Research 16(1), pp. 77-19 (2014).

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