WAR IS A STATE OF MIND

Some years ago I talked with a young Israeli writer. I was struck by the fact that in spite of being very successful and acclaimed by the critics, and that at a relatively early age, she somehow exuded an air of insecurity.

When I asked her about it, she broke down. "I never told this to anybody. My whole childhood was hell. I did not know that both my parents had been in Auschwitz. They never talked about it. I only knew that there was a terrible secret hanging over my family, a secret so awful that I was forbidden even to ask about it. I lived in constant fear, under a constant threat. I never had a feeling of security."

This is violence – not physical violence, but violence nonetheless. Many Israeli children have experienced it, even when the State of Israel became more and more powerful, and Security – with a capital S – became its fetish. We, Israelis and Palestinians, are living in a permanent war. It has lasted now for more than 120 years. A fifth generation of Israelis and Palestinians has been born into the war, like their parents and teachers. Their whole mental outlook has been shaped by the war from earliest childhood. Every day of their lives, violence has dominated the daily news.

In many ways, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unique. Putting a complex historical process in its simplest terms, it goes like this:

120 years ago, many Jews in Europe realized that the growing nationalism of the various peoples, almost always accompanied by a virulent anti-Semitism, was leading towards a catastrophe. They decided to become a nation themselves and set up a state for the Jews. They chose Palestine, the ancient homeland of their people, as the place to realize their dream. Their slogan was: "A country without people for a people without a country." But Palestine was not empty. The people living there objected, of course, to another people coming from nowhere and claiming their country.

The historian Isaac Deutscher has described the conflict in this way: A person lives on an upper floor of a building that has caught fire. To save himself, he jumps from the window and lands on a passerby below, injuring him grievously. Between the two, a

mortal enmity ensues. Who is in the right?

Every war creates fear, hatred, distrust, prejudices, demonization. All the more so a war lasting for generations. Each of the two peoples has created a narrative of their own. Between the two narratives – the Israeli and the Palestinian – there is not the slightest resemblance. What an Israeli child and a Palestinian child learn about the conflict from their earliest years – at home, in kindergarten, in school, from the media – is totally different.

Let's take an Israeli child. Even if his parents or grandparents were not Holocaust survivors, he learns that Jews have been persecuted throughout history – indeed, he learns that history is nothing but an endless story of persecution, inquisition and pogroms, leading to the terrible Shoah.

I once read the reports of a class of Israeli schoolchildren, who had been asked to write down their conclusions after visiting Auschwitz. About a quarter of them said: My conclusion is that after what the Germans have done to us, we must treat minorities and foreigners better than anyone else. But three quarters said: After what the Germans have done to us, our highest duty is to safeguard the existence of the Jewish people, by every possible means, without any limitations.

This feeling of being the eternal victim still persists, even after we have become a powerful nation in the State of Israel. It is deeply imbedded in our consciousness.

Already in kindergarten, and then every year in school, a Jewish child in Israel experiences an annual series of national and religious holidays (there is no real difference between the two) commemorating events in which Jews were victims and had to fight for their lives:

– Hannuka, commemorating the fight of the Maccabees against the Greek oppressors

– Purim, the victory over the Persians who tried to exterminate all the Jews

– Passover, the flight of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt

– Remembrance day, devoted to the Israeli soldiers killed in our many wars against the Arabs

– Independence Day, our desperate fight for survival in the 1948 war in which our state was founded;

– Holocaust Day

– The 9th of the month Av, when the Jewish temple was twice destroyed, once by the Babylonians and five centuries later by the Romans

– Jerusalem Day, when we conquered the Eastern part of the city, and much more, in the Six-day war.

– Only Yom Kippur is a purely religious holiday, but in our mind it irrevocably connected with the terrible war of 1973.

On each of these occasions, year after year, there are special classes explaining its meaning, imprinting its significance. The climax is the Seder on the eve of Passover, commemorating the exodus from Egypt, when in every Jewish home around the world an identical ceremony takes place. Every member of the family, from the oldest to the youngest, has a role and every sense – seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching – is engaged. No Jew, however secular he may be, is ever free from the memory of this hypnotizing event in his childhood, experienced in the warmth of the assembled family.

In the mind of the child, all these events become intermingled. My wife Rachel, who for many years has been a teacher of the first and second elementary school classes, says that the children do not really understand who came before whom – the Romans or the British, the Babylonians or the Arabs.

The cumulative effect of this is a world-view in which Jews at every period in every country had been threatened with annihilation and had to fight for their lives. The whole world is, always was and always will be, "against us". God – whether he exists or not – has promised us our country, and no one else has any right to it. This includes the Palestinian Arabs, who have lived there for at least 13 centuries.

With such an attitude, it is hard to make peace.

Now let's take a Palestinian child. What does he learn?

– That they belong to the Arab people, who had a glorious empire and a flourishing civilization in the Middle Ages, when Europeans were still barbarians, and who taught Europe science and brought it enlightenment.

– That the barbarian Crusaders perpetrated a horrendous bloodbath in Jerusalem and ravished Palestine, until they were driven out by the great Muslim hero, Salah-al-Din (Saladin).

– That the Palestinians were humiliated and oppressed for many centuries by rapacious foreigners, first the Turks and then the European colonialists, who brought the Zionists to Palestine in order to suppress all hope of the Arabs achieving freedom in their own countries.

– That in the great Nakba (calamity) of 1948, half the Palestinian people were driven out of their homes and country by the Zionists, and that since 1967 all the Palestinians have been vegetating either as refugees or as victims of an endless, cruel occupation.

Every Palestinian child grows up with a deep feeling of resentment and humiliation, the feeling of being the victim of a terrible injustice, able to redeem his people only by violent struggle, heroism and self-sacrifice.

How to make peace between two peoples in the grip of two contradictory, seemingly irreconcilable, narratives?

Certainly not by diplomatic maneuvers. These can ease the situation temporarily, but cannot in themselves put an end to the conflict. The history of the Oslo agreement shows that without dealing with the root causes of the conflict imbedded in the minds of the peoples, an agreement is nothing but a short-lived cease-fire.

Peace is a state of mind. The main task of peace-making is mental: to get the two peoples, and each individual, to see their own narrative in a new light, and – even more important – to understand the narrative of the other side. To internalize the fact that the two narratives are two sides of the same coin. This is mainly an educational undertaking. As such, it is incredibly difficult, because it first has to be absorbed by the teachers, who themselves are imbued with one or the other of these world-views.

Let me tell you a little story. Rachel was teaching her class the Biblical story of how Abraham bought a plot in Hebron from Ephron, its owner, in order to bury his wife, Sarah. First Ephron offered the plot for free, and only after many entreaties named a price, 400 silver shekels, saying "What is that betwixt me and thee?" (Genesis 23.)

Rachel explained to her children that that is the way business is conducted between the Bedouin in the desert even now. It is crass to come straight out with the price, one has to offer it first as a gift. Thus the transaction becomes polite and life more civilized.

In the intermission, Rachel asked the teacher of the parallel class how she had explained the chapter to her pupils. "Simple," she answered, "I told them that this is a typical example of Arab hypocrisy. You can't believe a word they say. They offer you a gift and than demand a high price!"

For peace to become possible, you need to change a whole mentality. That is what my friends and I, in the Israeli Peace Bloc Gush Shalom, are trying to do.

Is this possible at all?

Speaking here, in the center of what used to be the capital of Prussia, I am reminded of my childhood, when I was a pupil in what was then Prussia, which was then still governed by the Social Democrats. Once, when I was 9 years old, in pre-Hitlerite Hanover, the teacher was speaking about the statue of Hermann the Cherusker in the Teutoburger forest. "Hermann stands with his face to the arch-enemy (Erzfeind)," she said. "Children, who is the arch-enemy?" All the children answered in unison: "France! France!"

Today, after centuries of war, Germany and France are not only allies, but partners in the glorious enterprise of a united Europe. If this could happen here, peace is possible anywhere.

This is the text of a lecture in Berlin at the conference, "Raising Children without Violence"