

Thinking practically about the return of the Palestinian refugees

Introduction

For us Israelis, the “right of return” has always been a taboo topic. It stood for the demographic threat; “us or them;” the real fear of Palestinians in particular and of Arabs in general; “they’ll throw us into the sea;” and more.

Every person who was expelled in 1948, and their descendants, has a right to return; it’s a right that is personal as well as collective. This means that each refugee and his or her descendants have a right to **choose** among alternatives: returning to their former home (or nearby, if it no longer exists), receiving compensation, or resettlement in the original locality or elsewhere. Implementation of the right of return does not necessarily mean, as people mistakenly suppose, that the refugees will actually come back. Very often people ask, How long will the descendants of Palestinian refugees be themselves considered refugees? How many more generations of refugees will be born? We believe that the answer is – until the refugees and their descendants are given the opportunity to choose whether to return; in other words, until their right of return is implemented. Their freedom to choose where, and with whom, to live – and to gain the full rights of citizenship – is their road to liberation from the difficult condition of being a “refugee.”

The right of return is based on international law and supported by UN Resolution 194, which is reaffirmed every year by the UN General Assembly. Therefore, and because we don’t doubt that the **right** exists, we prefer to focus on the **return**. This right, like all other rights, is implemented through negotiations: we all have a right to freedom, but the freedom of each of us is limited by the freedom of others or by various interests. It is therefore very important to think about what the actual return of the refugees would entail. We also understand, in part from our own personal experience, that thinking about the return in concrete terms – in which the refugees have faces and names, when we know the names of their towns and villages, their locations and their histories – reduces the fear of their return, by making the process visible, and at the same time allows us to address the actual questions we’ll have to answer when it comes time to implement the return.

Most discussion of the “right of return” has, up till now, considered the phrase as a totality, indivisible. We, on the other hand, want to break it open, and propose not to talk about the right, but about the return. We choose to talk about the return and not about the “right” because discussion of the “right” usually turns into a competition over justice. Supporters of the “right of return” base their argument on justice for the refugees and the injustice of Zionism, while the opponents of the “right of return” claim that justice lies with Zionism, not with the refugees. This is more or less where the (lack of) discussion is stuck today – my justice versus yours. We prefer a different approach, one that can be seen as either a prologue or an epilogue to a discussion of the right, one that involves thinking about what, exactly, is involved in this idea of return that in fact receives so little attention. We believe that if we succeed in understanding what we’re talking about, we might be able to avoid the noisy arguments about justice, or, at least, define more clearly the points of disagreement. If, for example, we understand that it’s no longer an issue of

“us or them,” perhaps we could consider the possibility that Palestinian refugees might return without this being so threatening to the country’s Jews.

A few months ago *Zochrot* set up a working group to study the practical aspects of the return, intending to prepare a document, or a number of documents, outlining in general terms what the return would involve. It included people of different ages and backgrounds: activists, journalists, university faculty and educators. We devoted the first year to educating ourselves: we met with experts who taught us about international law, land issues, water and property, and described cases in which refugees returned elsewhere in the world. The *Zochrot* group operated in parallel with *B’dil*, a Palestinian organization centered in Bethlehem that is active in support of the rights of Palestinian refugees. The two groups sometimes met together.

In the initial stage of the *Zochrot* group’s work, the learning stage, participation was relatively lively. When the second stage began, when we had to start thinking for ourselves and writing, enthusiasm began to fade. It’s possible, of course, to explain this in all kinds of ways, related to group dynamics, or to various personal interests, but it’s also possible to see it as a symptom of how hard it was for us to imagine a different reality – a reality in which return was possible. Or, perhaps the gap between the reality we were trying to imagine and the one that we saw around us was so great that it seemed ridiculous to try bridging it. We also might have lacked a vocabulary with which to think about so different a reality. This document represents, in a sense, a continuation of that group’s work, a first attempt to meet the challenge of drafting what will appear sometimes as things we agree on with respect to the return of the Palestinian refugees, sometimes as criteria and sometimes as questions to which we have no answers. We are grateful to all those who participated in that group, as well as to all the members of *Zochrot* who helped us dare begin thinking aloud.

To make writing this document easier, we’ve divided the text into chronological stages: before the return; the return itself; after the return. We’ve tried with respect to each stage to describe the situation as we imagine it, and the necessary conditions (for what?). It is important to note that a topic that we assign to a particular stage doesn’t necessarily begin or end in that stage, but it is required for that stage to be implemented. While we wrote, there were times in which we tried to begin with the present and imagine the next steps, and other times in which we imagined what the situation would be like after the return and used that as a basis for imagining “in reverse.” This text can be read, therefore, as it appears here, from beginning to end – but also backward, from the end to the beginning.

Stage I – Before the return

Ending the violence

A question that often arises in discussions of the return, particularly among Jews, relates to violence: how will we deal with violence against Jews when the Palestinians return. This question deserves serious attention. It is based on a number of assumptions, which are worth making explicit:

1. There isn't any violence now.
2. If the Palestinians return, they'll do to us what we're doing to them.
3. Using violence is the only way to protect ourselves.

Hannah Arendt writes that violence requires instruments – and as soon as instruments exist, they are used. The level of violence today is very high, and it is directed primarily at Palestinians. Violence has become the official language here, and a different language must develop if any significant change is to occur. Obviously, any discussion whose aim is to encourage reconciliation between the two nations cannot ignore the severe violence caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A first step, therefore, has to be a cease-fire, cessation of attacks, an end to arrests, etc. Israel, the more powerful side and the occupier, must stop its violence against Palestinians and remove the roadblocks in the West Bank and between the West Bank and Gaza. For their part, the Palestinians must end all attacks on Israelis – on soldiers, settlers and other citizens.

Learning

One of the first things required is to begin learning: learning about the Palestinian *Nakba*, about the destroyed villages, the towns that were emptied by mass expulsions, the Palestinian culture which existed before the *Nakba*, and of course the Palestinian culture which developed afterwards. Not much is needed to learn these things, no revolutionary changes nor major investment of resources. It's enough to read books, take a tour or listen to stories, but it's mainly necessary to deal with what you learn and what it means. It's no accident that most Israeli Jews who grew up here know very little about Palestinian culture and about the *Nakba*. Learning about them is challenging; it cracks open the foundations on which we were raised and contains a surprising dimension: Who knows what we'll discover if we start digging?

The asymmetrical reality in which we live imposes on us an asymmetry of knowledge: Who has to learn, and who doesn't have to learn, and about what. Palestinians living under Israeli rule, for example, know much more about Zionism and about the hegemonic Israeli culture than Jews in Israel know about Palestinian history and culture. But, in order to create a different kind of society, it's also important for Palestinians to learn about non-hegemonic aspects of Jewish history and religion, as well as about the Israeli cultures that have developed here in recent years. Learning about the Holocaust in a Jewish context (and not in a Zionist context, as often happens here), about the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries, the sufferings of Ethiopian Jews on their way to Israel – in this way, Jews will be able to create for themselves a different history of their own, and Palestinians will understand the social and historical context in which the Jews live.

It is necessary for each side to learn about the other's history and culture in order to establish relations based on mutual respect, and this learning can already begin. It will not end when the return starts, but will deepen and become more pointed. Such learning will allow us to identify the connections between cultures, and the contexts within which both exist, and perhaps to begin reformulating them.

Mapping

One argument frequently raised against the possibility of return, even if the Palestinian demand to do so is justified, is that there simply is no room. This is a small, densely settled country, and there's no room for any more people. It's just a fact – look at the map, look at the plans. But maps, as we already know, don't only describe reality, but also create it. And if we want to create a different reality we'll need a different mapping with different categories, one that describes new dimensions and answers different questions. We'll need a mapping that examines, for example, where villages that were erased could be re-established – in other words, which destroyed villages could be rebuilt at the same site (Lifta? Bir'im?) and which could be re-established (Mas'ha? Saffurya?). Which villages could be re-established in the vicinity of their original lands or on some of them (Beit Jubrin? Zakkariya?), and where would this be impossible (Sumeil? Al-Sheikh Muwanis?). It would also be necessary to locate buildings that in 1948 belonged to Palestinians and are held today by Jews (or by other Palestinians), like in Jaffa or in Ein Karem; how many buildings that housed Palestinian institutions still exist, and how many of them still house public institutions (assuming it is easier to transfer the use of a public institution from one community to another than it is to move families around).

Mapping is important not only to understand the geographical situation, but also in order to understand the social conditions in each place, and thereby identify the individuals and groups who will negotiate over its future character. The mapping must also describe plans for land use in the future, as these are defined in official planning documents. Lands expropriated from the refugees have changed ownership over the years, and many city and regional plans refer to them. This doesn't mean, of course, that existing zoning or construction plans can't be changed, but plans to build new localities in the future must take them into consideration.

The results of Salman Abu-Sitte's research contradict the assumption that "there's no room." He shows that most of the built-up core of the villages that existed until the *Nakba* has remained vacant. On tours conducted by *Zochrot*, we saw again and again that most of the villages were still empty, unlike the agricultural and public lands, most of which had been allocated to Jewish localities and was in use. This refutes the argument that all the village lands are occupied by Jews.

Mapping will help us understand in a more responsible manner the situation on the ground and, equally important, train us to view the country differently – not as divided up and fenced in, but as a single entity between the Jordan and the sea in which people live who have common interests, and who want to create a better, more appropriate life for themselves.

Surveys

The term “surveys” may sound almost like a dirty word in the context of discussions about the return of Palestinian refugees, since many surveys that were carried out served the interests of those who wanted to prove that refugees wouldn’t want to return if and when they had the chance to do so, and might prefer compensation that would allow them to stay where they were. Many surveys were conducted of Palestinians and of Jews. They frightened some people, and encouraged others. When, for example, refugees were asked whether they wanted to return to Israel, the assumption was that Israel would remain a Jewish state, and many refugees answered “no.” We, on the other hand, propose to survey both Israelis and Palestinians on the assumption that the return will be implemented and that members of both groups will live together in full civic equality. The question, then, is how this can be done. (How can what be done – the survey, or implementing the return and full civic equality?)

It would be important, for example, to ask how many Jewish homeowners would be willing to return their property to their original owners, or how many Jews who live abroad would be likely to move here. We’d have to ask how many Palestinians would want to return, where they would want to return to, איזה הרכב ((אינני מבין מה הכוונה), what kind of job would they want, whether they would like to change their occupation, what property they owned before the *Naqba*, etc. How would someone who had no property return or be compensated? What about tenants who worked lands owned by others? Other questions include: How can the creation of a society with huge economic inequalities be prevented? Which destroyed Palestinian localities were home to large enough groups of refugees who might be able to resettle them? Would they want to establish a locality of their own, or build one together with refugees from other localities? Would entire communities of the displaced (such as a refugee camp in Lebanon in which refugees from many villages live, and which itself forms a community) wish to remain together?

A constitution

It will not be possible at first to agree on a constitution, which would have to be drafted together with the Palestinian refugees who are not yet here. Doing so raises the same kinds of technical and ideological issues that characterize the discussion over a constitution for the state of Israel: one justification for that delay is said to be the desire to wait until all the world’s Jews have moved here. The lesson to be learned from that experience is to proceed as rapidly as possible to formulate a constitution, or at least a “minimal constitution” containing elements on which there is fundamental agreement and that can serve as a basis for the eventual creation of a more complete document. We believe that a minimal constitution would calm apprehensions (primarily among Jews) resulting from the return of refugees. Here is a preliminary framework:

- The constitution will be based on the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (since the Hebrew refers to “international law,” it seemed to me simplest to refer to the UN. If this isn’t good, you could write “based on “the declaration of human and civil rights as reflected in international law,” but I don’t know whether there is any such thing.)
- All residents of the country will be equal citizens. האם זו הכוונה ב"אזרחות שווה"?

- Immigration law: Cancelling the Law of Return as it is currently formulated will, of course, be one of the first steps taken, in addition to confirming the Palestinian refugees' right of return. After a set period has elapsed, the government will establish new immigration laws that will give preference to Jews and Palestinians, whose entry will be allowed according to specified criteria.
- Separating religion from the state.
- Legal reforms to eliminate preferences benefiting Jews.
- Negotiations over the constitution will include instituting an agrarian reform in which lands allocated by the state to Jews (kibbutzim and moshavim, for example[?]) will be redistributed.
- Every citizen may live anywhere he chooses in the country.
- No person may be forcibly evicted from the house in which he lives.

Planning and construction

New construction plans must be prepared during this stage. Which new localities will be built? Which existing localities will be expanded in order to receive the returnees? New country-wide master plans will have to be prepared that take into account considerations based on results of the mapping and surveys. In other words, construction plans must reflect the discussions and negotiations between the returning refugees and the residents of the country.

Stage II – The Return

Before the refugees actually return, the ground must be prepared. We consider four elements of such preparation that could help pave the way: “Birthright” tours; establishing absorption centers; readying the receiving society; orienting the migrants.

--The format of “Birthright” tours that the Jewish Agency organizes for Jewish youth from abroad in order to introduce them to the country could be a model for the return of Palestinian refugees. During the decades that have passed since the *Nakba*, the country has changed almost beyond recognition. The refugees, most of whom have not been here since they left, must be aware of what awaits them. The village they remember no longer exists, and the landscape often contains little hint that it ever existed. It is important for those wishing to return (or their representatives) to tour the area in order to see what things actually look like, who their new neighbors will be, and maybe even who now occupies the houses where their mothers and fathers lived in the past.

--The receiving society must also prepare for the refugees' return. Successful absorption of a large number of immigrants requires great effort. Palestinians living in Israel will play a major role here. They will “naturally” be the ones to assist their brethren who return to Israeli territory, which is the area in which most of them, or their parents, lived before they became refugees. There may be those who prefer to live in the West Bank or in Gaza, but that would probably require less preparation or advance planning. Palestinian citizens of Israel are familiar with both Israeli and Palestinian society, and it will not be difficult for them to describe to other Palestinians what it's like to live with Jews. Jews will also have to be prepared to absorb the refugees. Many changes will

occur – cultural, demographic, economic and others – and Israeli Jews will have to be ready for them.

--The returning refugees will also need preparation. Civil society has a prominent role to play here. The preparation must begin with educational activities in the Palestinian diaspora and continue in absorption centers in Israel, perhaps in the same way that kibbutz members were trained before moving onto the land that had been allocated to them.

The actual return of the refugees must occur in stages, gradually, taking into account the absorptive capacity of the country. (יש מידה מסוימת של אירוניה בכך שלשון הטקסט הזה) חוזר, פה ושם, על לשונה של ממשלת המנדט, ועוד יותר אירוניה בעובדה כי הרבה מהמודל לקליטת הפליטים החוזרים מבוסס במפורש על המודל הציוני. אבל, כפי שמרקס אמר, ההיסטוריה מלאה באירוניה, ואף חוזרת על עצמה, בפעם הראשונה כטרגדיה, ובשניה (כפארסה.) To actually return, even when doing so may be a Palestinian refugee's lifelong desire, is still migration – and every migration involves being uprooted from somewhere. In the case of the Palestinians, **all** the refugees who choose to return have lived for most of their lives in some other place, in some form of exile. Most of their lives have been lived in places that had not been their destinations, but which they still feel is where they belong: they are used to them, are familiar with them, and over the years they became a kind of home. Their actual return becomes a (willing) uprooting from the places where they live. Its successful implementation requires the preparation of the refugees themselves, the receiving communities and the absorption system. Therefore, the return cannot be simply a spontaneous process that depends only on the decisions of the returning refugee.

The process of return also depends on systemic factors, which will undoubtedly limit the number of returnees according to the capacity to absorb them. Criteria are therefore required in order to decide who goes first. Here are some possible criteria:

1. **Age:** Refugees who were themselves forced to leave and wish to return will have preference over others. There is no need to justify preferring an elderly person who wishes to return over members of the second or third *Nakba* generation. These elderly people will return, of course, with those family members who wish to accompany them. (The issue of how broadly “family” will be defined for this purpose is not one we have to consider here.)
2. **Refugees in Lebanon:** Refugees who live in Lebanon will be next on the list, because the social and physical conditions of their existence are in general worse than those of refugees in other countries. The condition of those living in refugee camps is the worst of all, but even people who moved out of the camps lack civil rights and are prevented from working in dozens of occupations. They are under great pressure from the Lebanese government and the Lebanese population.
3. **Preserving community:** Migration is more successful when the migrants – the returning refugees - are able to maintain in their country of destination the community

structures that existed prior to their migration. Two types of communities are relevant: those that existed in their localities of origin, from which the refugees were originally uprooted, and those in which they live now, for example a camp with refugees from many localities. The members of both types may wish to preserve their communal life and return together with the others. Israel adopted a similar approach to the resettlement of residents who had been evicted from the localities in Gush Katif prior to Israel's withdrawal from the area, and tried to move them together to their new locations. Refugees in the Ein al-Hilweh camp in Lebanon, for example, have lived together in the camp for much longer than they lived in the individual villages in Palestine from which they were uprooted. It is possible that they may also choose to live together after the return, perhaps preserving the collective memory of each original locality, as has actually occurred in many places since the *Nakba*. But there may also be people from the same village who wish to live together in their own separate locality, and this possibility must also be considered.

The gradual return of the refugees also applies to the total number who will return each year. A yearly quota should be established, for two reasons: the first, and obvious reason, is connected to absorptive capacity. The second is Jewish fears that they will be displaced by the returning refugees after so many years of conflict and occupation. Jews (and Arabs in Israel?) should be guaranteed against being forcibly evicted from the homes in which they live. They will be given the opportunity to leave in return for appropriate compensation, but under no circumstances will they be compelled to do so.

A number of questions arise which must be considered: What happens in the case of a building originally owned by Palestinians, whose former owners demand its return, and it is occupied by Jews or others who refuse to leave? What if its occupants purchased it in good faith from the state or from its previous owners? And what if the original Palestinian owner is no longer living, and his descendants claim it?

The answers provided by international law seem to be inadequate. For example, according to international law, if the house has remained more or less in the condition it was prior to 1948, the Palestinian owner has a stronger claim than he would have if the building had undergone major renovations and improvement, in which case the present occupants have the stronger claim. In our opinion - as laymen, not as lawyers - the present occupants' claim grows stronger with time. When, after scores of years have passed, second, third or fourth generation heirs claim their property from the current occupants who purchased it in good faith, their claim is weaker than that of someone whose property was taken only recently. On the other hand, during the return, and in hope of encouraging reconciliation, it is worth offering incentives so that both sides will be willing to make "painful concessions." For example, Jews who relinquish their property to returning refugees would receive appropriate compensation and public recognition, as would Palestinians who relinquish their claim in favor of the current occupants.

Internal refugees first

Israeli citizens who are internal refugees can return before refugees from abroad – since many of the challenges that the latter will face do not apply to the internal refugees. The short distances, physical proximity and familiarity with local conditions provide them with many advantages that will help them plan their return. For example, the displaced residents of Saffurya, most of whom live in Nazareth's Sfafara neighborhood, could decide relatively easily whether any of them are interested in returning to their former locality, only a few kilometers away from where they now live. After deciding, they would be able to begin planning to rebuild, together with official and unofficial planning agencies, so that their needs are met. Their Jewish neighbors, residents of the moshav Zipori and others, must be part of this planning. [But, according to the constitution, moshav residents will have their lands taken and redistributed. That won't encourage their cooperation here...] Returning the internal refugees first will also make it easier for them to orient those who live abroad before their return, and assist in their absorption after they arrive. Their own experience will expose them to the challenges that the others will face, and they will be able to provide help and advice about useful strategies that they themselves developed to deal with their own readjustment. We believe that Israeli Jews will be more willing to accept the return and resettlement of their displaced neighbors, and slowly accept the idea of the return in general.

Burial and visiting

The refugees' return has two more elements that complement each other: burial and visiting. Palestinian refugees (as well as Jews living abroad) will always have the right to be buried here. Many refugees may not wish to return to Palestine, but they may want to be buried here after they die. This return does not require a very great investment, but its symbolic and practical importance is great. Similarly, refugees living abroad will forever have an unlimited right to visit.

Where will they return to?

A crucial question, of course, is where the refugees will return to. There are various possibilities: to the localities from which they were expelled; near those localities; to other localities; to new communal localities made of different refugee groups; or to localities formed jointly with Jewish groups.

1. Returning to the localities from which the refugees were expelled seems like the most "natural" solution, and in some case could actually occur. A number of conditions are required. First, there must be a large enough group willing to reestablish the locality. Second, the built-up core of the village that was destroyed must still be mostly uninhabited, and there must be surrounding land that can be attached to it. Third, various planning elements, such as ecological factors, infrastructure, etc., must be considered.
2. If the locality no longer exists, or if others now live there, or if it has been turned into an industrial area, it could be reestablished nearby. Such a solution preserves the proximity to the original geographical area, on the one hand, but is adapted to the changed circumstances, on the other. An example would be the villages that were located on lands that today are covered by Tel Aviv neighborhoods. The residents of

Sumeil can't return to their lands because, aside from a few buildings, nothing remains, and their agricultural lands are today in the center of Tel Aviv. But they could receive apartments in the buildings that will soon be built there. They could live in them, rent them out, or sell them. It would also be possible to establish a locality near Tel Aviv for all the refugees from those villages who wish to return. Another possibility would be establishing a Palestinian locality adjacent to an existing Jewish locality. The moshav Kerem Ben Zimra, for example, is located on the former site of al-Ras al-Ahmar, and Kerem Maharal sits on I'jzim's land. Kerem Ben Zimra and Kerem Maharal could be expanded by the addition of neighborhoods occupied by returning Palestinian refugees.

3. Groups of displaced persons from different localities may wish to resettle together. As stated above, if residents of a particular refugee camp, who originally came from different localities, wish to preserve the community they established in exile rather than those from which they originally came, new localities would be established near those from which they were displaced. Such localities are usually made up of refugees from nearby villages, as in the Galilee.
4. Refugees may also return to other places. They may resettle anywhere in the country, and nothing would prevent refugees from Haifa, for example, from wanting to live in Nazareth or in Tel Aviv.

Stage III – After the return

What form will the state take?

At this point we will try to sketch an outline for creating the state to be established after the refugees return, which we view as an opportunity to make a new beginning and create a new social order. We propose thinking about a form other than the familiar nation-state – one that will not have to define itself in defensive terms against an external enemy but will instead be defined by the communities of which it is composed. Our state is a “weak state,” secular, with a strong constitution, limited in scope, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its constitution will provide a strong, limited framework that allows “strong” communities to be established, each of which will have its own social and cultural autonomy (within the framework of the country's basic laws). Each community will be the equivalent of a state, in the sense that it will be able to create its own social and cultural structures. We envision not a “polis,” a city-state, but a community-state. One important purpose of such a state would be to maintain a multi-cultural framework that would allow all its citizens to live a full life. The state, for example, would be responsible for the road system and would prevent the development of a predatory market as well as prevent one group gaining power over the others. The state's supreme authority, based in its limited constitution, will be primarily formal and regulatory in nature.

Citizenship in each of the community-states will not be linked to its geographical location: a number of community-state entities could exist in the same region. There could be some in Tel Aviv, each of which would maintain its own educational system,

language and customs. There could be, side by side, schools whose languages of instruction are Arabic, Hebrew, Amharic, Russian, or some other tongue, and the curriculum in each school would be determined by the community-state that runs it. The national government would have the authority to reject curricula (if, for example, they encouraged racism), but would not have to approve them.

Creating a multi-cultural space within the state will not only permit Jewish and Arab communities that currently exist to maintain cultural autonomy – but will also dismantle the fictitious unity we find today, in which the Jewish community in the form of the nation-state confronts the Palestinian community in the form of the nation (non)state. At present, internal differences within each community are suppressed, and the groups which make up each national community are unable to express themselves equally. The hegemonic group (among Jews, the Ashkenazis) colors all the rest white, and the others – like Ethiopians, or labor migrants – have no place in the state as we know it today. Separating citizenship from nationality by establishing many community-states will permit the creation of additional communities which will not be defined in national terms. For example, community-states of farmers, or of artists, might be created. Such community-states would, naturally, be connected to each other by ties of greater or lesser strength, and these connections would have continually to be reconstituted.

Reconciliation

A new political order is not all that is necessary to renew our lives here. New forms of relationships must be established, based on mutual trust among people – those who now live here as well as those who will arrive in the future. To create a healthy society, wounds that have opened and festered during the past sixty years must be healed. Public space must be provided for speaking about injustice and for listening to the stories of victims and of perpetrators. One possible model that might be applicable is that of the South African “Truth and Reconciliation Commissions,” which may have been the first attempt to distinguish among truth, responsibility and punishment for injustice. It is possible, for example, to say that the events of ’48, ’67 or even the recent shelling and bombing of Gaza were the result of what was taken for granted at the time, and not decisions made by particular individuals; that this officer, or that minister, can’t be blamed, since they were only carrying out the mandate that came with their job. But, if we say that everyone is to blame, that’s like saying no one is to blame, and worse – that no one can take responsibility. That’s what’s interesting about the South African model. The “Truth and Reconciliation Commissions” demand the truth. The victims present their accounts, and the perpetrators are also required to tell their stories publicly; it is the public account that leads to healing, not only of those presenting their stories, but of the entire society.

Was this worthwhile?

Having presented these preliminary reflections about the possible return of Palestinian refugees, it is important, instead of summing up, to explain why it’s worthwhile thinking about such things. Let’s start by indicating what each side would have to give up in order for the Palestinian refugees to return.

Jews relinquish sovereignty, exclusive control over the country, the guaranteed Jewish majority. After more than 100 years of socialization to Zionism, that will require courage and daring. When the refugees return, Jews will become a minority in the country. Israel as a Jewish state will change radically, and it will no longer be defined as such. Jews will no longer be able to determine their future, and that of the Palestinians, by themselves. They will have rights as a minority in a democracy, but also many constraints.

So why is it worthwhile? In our view, a situation in which Palestinian refugees are no longer prevented from returning to their land allows Jews, for the first time since the beginning of Zionism, to live in the country instead of prevailing as occupiers or dreamers of a mythological “return to Zion.” When the myth of “Eretz Yisrael” evaporates, and the country becomes an actual political entity, Jews will finally – paradoxically – be able to “arrive” at a real place, land here, see and learn its history at close hand, its geography and its demography. Only when Jews come to see the Palestinians who live here, and those who were expelled, as people worth living with can we hope to live here fairly and equitably. As a minority, Jews will be able to continue living more or less as they’ve been used to: life in Jewish localities shouldn’t have to change much – and even if it does, the change will be gradual and consensual. Jews can continue to create in Hebrew, to learn Jewish history and support Jewish and Hebrew culture.

Palestinians, for their part, will have to relinquish their dream of a lost paradise. The mythological Palestine, in which all was wonderful, will never return, and will exist only in the world of memory and yearning. For Palestinians, living with Jews means living with the occupier, with those who expelled most of their countrymen. This is a tremendous challenge for someone whose land was occupied, and who would certainly have preferred the occupier to simply disappear, evaporate. That won’t happen. There may be Jews, most of them of European origin, who won’t be able to adjust to a non-Zionist reality, and prefer to use their other passport to move elsewhere, but many will remain – among them those who simply have nowhere else to go, or don’t have the resources to leave. We think that the cost of realizing paradise on earth is greater than the cost of giving up that hope. In the real world, it’s necessary to take into consideration the tremendous changes that have occurred in the country since the time of the *Nakba*, but not all of them have been for the worse.