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[INTERVIEW]

The Right of Return (I)

An Interview with Benny Morris

Benny Morris is the most prominent of Israel's "New Historians." He is the author of several books, including most recently Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–1999 (Knopf, 1999). His path-breaking article on the "New Historiography: Israel Confronts Its Past" first appeared in Tikkun in 1988.

Tikkun: In the past few years many Israelis have come to realize that the Palestinian refugee problem was not caused by the voluntary flight of a civilian population expecting the imminent defeat of Israel, but was caused by the military actions of the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement) which forced people out of their homes. These ideas are now entering Israeli textbooks, but have they had any impact on Israeli policy during the current phase of the struggle?

Benny Morris: We must distinguish between official government statements and the attitudes of the public. The official line remains unchanged: that Israel had nothing to do with the creation of the refugees, that Arab leaders asked or ordered Palestinians to flee, and therefore Israel had nothing to do with it. But the Israeli public—partly influenced by our extensive research into recently opened archives, research which is, as you say, now entering high school textbooks—have begun to understand that a large part of the Palestinian population fled because of Israeli attacks and Israeli expulsions.

An increasing number of Israelis now recognize that Israel played a significant part in creating the problem. But Israelis also engage in the psychological repression of what they know intellectually. No one likes to feel that its own statehood was built on the ruins of another people's fortunes.

It's also a matter of current politics. Privately, I assume that someone like Yossi Beilin (who served as Minister of Justice in the Barak cabinet) would agree with my analysis, but would not say so publicly. But Israelis won't admit guilt publicly because they don't want to open the door to demands for a "right to return." There is agreement on this all through the Israeli political spectrum—because the return of hundreds of thousands or possibly millions of Palestinians would undermine the Jewish character of Israel.

Tikkun: Do you agree with that position?

Morris: I do. The state envisioned by the founders of Zionism was a state composed of a large majority of Jews. At the moment, Israel is about 20 percent Arab and 80 percent Jewish. If you were to allow a right of return for several million Palestinians (who have higher birthrates than Israeli Jews) you'd soon have an almost balanced Arab/Jewish population—and that would soon mean that you'd no longer have a Jewish state.

At the present moment, if you speak to most of these refugees who live in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan you will find that they have a wish to return to their villages, their towns, and their houses. But those villages were destroyed, the towns have been repopulated with Jews, the homes have been transformed in the past fifty-two years. There is no place to bring them back to. What happened in 1948 is irreversible.

Tikkun: So what should Israel do?

Morris: Israel has to be involved in solving the refugee problem, but it cannot do it without a serious commitment on the part of the international community. The refugees have to be economically rehabilitated and given citizenship in the states where they live, with perhaps a trickle of refugees

being allowed to return to Israel (a few thousand, no more). We are talking many billions of dollars.

But this is not on the agenda now and won't be for many years, because the Palestinian people are not at a point psychologically where they can agree to such a solution. They—their leaders—still seem to demand a massive return of refugees to Israel. As long as this remains the case, there will be no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem.

Israel has done its share—it has recognized the PLO, recognized the necessity of dividing Palestine between a Jewish state and a smaller Palestinian state. This is a vast revolution in Israeli thinking compared to where Israelis were on this question in the years between 1948-1992. Barak has even gone further, agreeing to divide Jerusalem. But Israel cannot accept the right of return without facing destruction.

Tikkun: You mean destruction of the Jewish character of the state?

Morris: No, I also mean physical destruction. A country divided between Israelis on the one hand and on the other Palestinians who had returned and were filled with anger not only at the way they had been treated in the past but also at not finding their villages or homes available—that country would quickly become ungovernable. Each individual Jew living in the country would be facing a real physical danger.

So you can't demand recognition of "the right of return" because that recognition would likely lead to demand for implementation somewhere down the road.

Tikkun: Could Israel publicly recognize its responsibility for having played a major role in creating the problem?

Morris: No, because if it did, even if Arafat today signed an agreement waiving the "right to return," future generations of Palestinians would re-raise the issue based on Israel having publicly stated its responsibility. Perhaps it could be papered over with some vague diplomatic formulation. But no more than that.

Tikkun: But your own work as an historian proved that Israel had major responsibility for creating the problem.

Morris: Yes, and that is true on many levels. On the macro-level, there is no question that there would never have been a Palestinian refugee problem had there been no Zionist movement. If Jews hadn't started buying up land and pushing Palestinians off the land, and then in 1948 and again in 1967, pushing out Palestinians, there would be no Palestinian refugees. And on the micro-level, there were many specific instances in 1947–48 in which Israel took military steps that caused Palestinians to be expelled. But this cannot translate today into acceptance of political guilt that would lead to a "return."

Tikkun: How about in terms of reparations?

Morris: That's something different, and something that Israel could do, but only with the cooperation and strong participation of the world community. We are talking of tens of billions of dollars if not hundreds of billions. But the problem today is that the Palestinians are rejecting this option and demanding instead an actual implementation of the right of return. Of course, they could return to the areas of a Palestinian state, but those areas would become overcrowded and explosive, and Palestinians would once again seek to push into Israel. Also, Palestinians living in the West Bank would probably object to the introduction of millions of refugees into their country. Nothing will work until the refugees themselves are willing to settle for something less than return to their villages and old homes. And Arafat doesn't seem to have the guts to tell this to his own people that they cannot go back to the old country. Perhaps he'd be assassinated if he did say this.

Tikkun: Perhaps he can't do it because agreeing to that would not be representing the actual desires of the people he represents?

Morris: That's right. Of course, Arafat has said the same thing Israel has said: that he would submit any agreement he reached to a democratic vote. But in his case the question remains: to which people would he submit the agreement—to the people living in the West Bank and Gaza, or to all Palestinians around the world? If Arafat includes the Palestinian Diaspora there is no way any agreement he would negotiate that did not include the right of return would in fact pass.

So this is a terrible dilemma. It may be that we need to wait generations before a Palestinian public will emerge that is ready to accept the reality that the refugees cannot return.



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