



WITHIN YOUR GATES

בשעריך פי אבובים

Reopening Hearts – It Takes More than Words

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Introduction

In the context of violent struggles like the one between Israelis and Palestinians, language is not a theoretical problem, but an integral part of a ferocious war, potentially adding to the horrific suffering inflicted on millions of people. As many of my co-contributors show, there are endless words that “close hearts,” but no simple ones that can “reopen” them.

In such a context of fiercely contested lexica, it is therefore worthwhile to ask whether an intellectual, truth-seeking deliberation between informed parties is even possible. Or is every dialogue only a continuation of the war, serving the affirmation and mobilization of one’s camp, or the delegitimization of the other?

A quick look at the different deliberation platforms does not fill one with too much hope. The journalistic debates of “the two sides” resemble gladiator fights in which each side focuses on humiliating the other for their ignorance and moral inferiority. The “raw honesty” of social media reveals dark and frightening abysses of human souls more than anything. The academic discourse, too – maybe because it is presented as disjunct from the political sphere – fails its own objective of pursuing the truth. Theoretical frameworks are presented as “be-all-and-end-all” truths, with their proponents claiming to be the ones “speaking truth to power,”¹ and those who do not adopt their exact lexicon are mocked as puppets of some evil power structures.

The lexical problem is real. Each side has woven a collective ethos that forms what Pierre Bourdieu calls “habitus,”² and Edward Said defines as “a coherent amalgam of practices

¹ Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 85–102.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

linking habit with inhabitance.”³ Language is the material through which the collective ethos takes narrative form, like threads strung into a rug. They serve as guardrails in a world of trauma that no side can just give up on if what awaits is an abyss of defenseless exile. People will protect each word in these narratives zealously, afraid that if pulled, they might unravel the entire rug.

In search of a way out, I will revisit the importance of “mutual respect” as “a necessary condition for [adopting] the perspective of one’s interlocutor and project oneself into her situation.”⁴ In addition, I will build on the broader concept of “excellence of character” (“*husn al khulq*”) as articulated by Sari Nusseibeh, which includes ethical conduct, such as proper etiquette, as well as virtues such as justice, truthfulness, and mercy.⁵ Nusseibeh argues that we might be able to reason without ethical behavior, but excellence of character provides a sufficient condition for carrying people through joint problem-solving.

What makes “excellence of character” extremely relevant for our case is that it can be cultivated. This lets us move beyond well-intentioned dialogues that skirt controversy and, thus, deliberation. The idea is that personal encounters in which things like tact, respect, and etiquette matter offer a good way to cultivate not just proper conduct, but also virtues such as justice, truthfulness, and mercy. It will not automatically lead to reconciliation or justice, nor will it stop violence, but it can hopefully open at least some hearts, making deliberation a bit more possible. It may contribute to creating a new inclusive “habitus,” anchored in the common good of all.

The Challenge of Language - More than Semantics

Language translates ethos into narrative form, but it is not merely a mirror of reality; it is an integral part of the social fabric.⁶ Each term in these narratives is not only understood in relation to other terms and its linguistic context; as an integral part of the social fabric, it can also influence reality. The relationship between our narratives and our ethos is reflexive.

³ Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Granta* 13 (1984), <https://granta.com/reflections-on-exile/>.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics* (Polity, 2023).

⁵ Sari Nusseibeh, *الكشاف: أو الفلسفة ونحن* (*The Scout, or Philosophy and Us*) (Arabic Institute for Research and Publishing, 2025), 48-55. (my translation from Arabic).

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein et al., *Philosophische Untersuchungen: = Philosophical investigations*, Rev. 4. ed., 3. [Dr.] (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), §1–§7, §43

If speaking is doing, our narratives and their lexica are tools.⁷ People intuitively use these tools to advance their interests and to protect themselves against existential threats in what they perceive as a zero-sum game of life and death. This explains the challenge with intellectual deliberation. For it to be meaningful, it requires us to “adopt the perspective of one’s interlocutor,” which includes yielding our protective tools and exposing ourselves to the offensive tools of others.

That is harder than it sounds. In a world full of trauma, our narratives form a guardrail that “fends off exile.”⁸ Said skillfully captures a genuine anxiety when he juxtaposes Bourdieu’s “habitus” with defenseless exile. He poetically describes this habitus as “a history selectively strung together in a narrative form.”⁹ I am not sure if the choice was deliberate, but for Said, this narrative comes as an “amalgam.” Once formed, amalgams remain static. We cannot pull single threads from the narrative and expect it to remain whole. Hence, challenging individual terms within a narrative can be perceived as jeopardizing the entire structure that grants sanity in a world full of trauma.

But if we go back to Bourdieu, we are reminded that our habitus is not static, but an organic “system of durable, transposable dispositions,”¹⁰ which one could argue aligns with common sense, including our ability to live with seeming inconsistencies. The problem is that we often treat narratives as (static) “be-all-and-end-all” frameworks, especially in intellectual circles, and we have to take their roots seriously.

The Challenge of Unbelieving

The notion that we perceive our narratives as amalgams might explain why people who give in to an argument from the other side don’t augment their suppositions with new perspectives. Instead, they flip narratives, exchanging one coherent amalgam with another.

The Jewish-American writer Kim Chernin describes such a journey.¹¹ She started as a full-fledged Zionist who was blind to the suffering of Palestinians. She gradually opened up to the Palestinian view in a way that might be considered a complete transformation. It is almost ironic how the later Chernin tries to understand why she was utterly deaf to the

⁷ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 1st ed, with James O. Urmson (Echo Point Books & Media, LLC, 1962), 1–11.

⁸ Said, “Reflections on Exile.”

⁹ Said, “Reflections on Exile.”

¹⁰ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 77–78.

¹¹ Kim Chernin, *Everywhere a Guest, Nowhere at Home: A New Vision of Israel and Palestine* (North Atlantic Books, 2009).

Palestinian voice. I would hypothesize that the fact that she ended up giving up her former beliefs is a potential explanation of why she was initially unable to engage the Palestinian view. Maybe that former self (subconsciously) assumed that her beliefs resembled a house of cards. She risked seeing her moral compass crumble once she pulled one or two cards.

I want to make an even more far-reaching hypothesis. Psychologists argue that we must begin by attempting to believe a statement if we're going to understand it.¹² Only then can we unbelieve it. Try this example: "Elephants watch movies." We all need first to imagine elephants enjoying a movie before we can refute it as ridiculous. In his paper "How Mental Systems Believe," Daniel Gilbert invites us to imagine our minds as libraries in which ideas are stacked like books in two categories.¹³ Their covers are tagged as either "true" or "false." Our minds contain no uncategorized ideas. Gilbert argues that we first categorize a new idea as true, then pull it out, challenge it, and either keep it as "true" or re-categorize it as "false," as we did with the elephants watching a movie. While the first part (attempting to believe an idea) is relatively automatic, the second part (pulling the idea out and challenging it) consumes our effort.

If this theory is true, it would also explain why we avoid seemingly heretical ideas from the get-go. After all, there is no understanding of a heretical idea without attempting to believe it first. Even more so, there is also no assurance that we will be able to disbelieve it afterward. We might lack good arguments or the mere energy to do so. Søren Kierkegaard speaks of "fear and trembling,"¹⁴ an angst that haunts us when we face our finitude, the absolute heresy for the believer. Those who lack such angst are not the firm believers. They are just not attempting to believe and, thus, do not truly understand the heresy.

My hypothesis is that this is what happens to enemies when they face the other collective as a legitimate entity. It can explain why one cannot even stand the sight of the other's national symbols, why one struggles with the other's entire language, and why each side struggles to utter the other's very name. Each side seems to fear that if they recognize the other as a legitimate collective (a heresy in their minds), they will have to give up so much that their entire world of beliefs might crumble.

¹² Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 80-81.

¹³ Daniel T. Gilbert, "How Mental Systems Believe," *American Psychologist* 46, no. 2 (1991): 107-19.

¹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard et al., *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*, Repr. with a new chronology, Penguin Classics (Penguin, 2003), 42, following Philippians 2:12.

The Prerequisite for Deliberation

At this stage, the cynic might argue that this is yet another proof that there is no hope, and that conflicts like the one in the Middle East are destined to remain endless. Who has not been in this conversation, where even the most intellectual counterparts will explain the essentialist and static nature of religions, ideologies, and collectives, usually the ones they do not belong to?

Unfortunately, the academic world may not help us refute this claim. Just like everyone else, academics cling to their opinions. Max Planck is often quoted for his cynical view that “a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.”¹⁵ This stubbornness is usually attributed to hubris or confirmation bias.¹⁶ But in light of the above, I want to emphasize that scholars are an intrinsic part of the conflict. They, too, feed on these narratives that grant them meaning and sanity. This by itself is not a problem. It becomes one when academics transform narratives into alleged sophisticated “be-all-and-end-all” frameworks.

With all due respect to these narratives and their critical role in offering a habitus, they model only a fraction of the world’s complexities. There is a huge risk in attempting to fit every explanation into these models, and treating them as realities. We risk ending up with simplistic “caricatures” that “impoverish history – and as a consequence, impoverish our sense of possibility.”¹⁷ If history teaches us anything, it is that human history is not static, nor does it follow deterministic processes. It is full of stochasticity, driven by our agency to disobey and to reinvent societal structures.

This perspective on human agency urges us to continue emerging from our “self-imposed immaturity.”¹⁸ We should keep challenging our presuppositions, either by decision or by experience.¹⁹ The open society depends on our ability to conduct a democratic deliberation process in which people are able to exchange views and to refute each other’s hypotheses.

¹⁵ Max Planck, *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers* (Philosophical Library, 1950), 33.

¹⁶ For confirmation bias see Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 80-81. For overconfidence see Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 161-165.

¹⁷ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 22.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, “Beantwortung Der Frage: Was Ist Aufklärung?,” in *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, vol. 4 (1784), 481–494 (What is Enlightenment?).

¹⁹ Following Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 2: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, Routledge Classics ed. (Routledge, 2003), 244.

But we cannot hope to regain trust in intellectual or rational deliberation by asking the parties only to challenge their own narratives and rigorously discern between their ideologies and theories.²⁰ We should go beyond merely setting expectations, which are often hard to meet, and instead show genuine compassion to our fellow humans, who are asked to do the unthinkable. We ask them to relinquish their comfort – like a “rod and staff” – that guides them through “the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23:4). Mutual compassion is connected to mutual respect, which Jürgen Habermas identified as the prerequisite for any deliberation:

“[Mutual] respect includes the willingness to justify one’s political opinion to the other person – that is, to engage in discourse with her. Admittedly, this is only a necessary condition for the more far-reaching expectation that, in the course of the discourse, one should also adopt the perspective of one’s interlocutor and project oneself into her situation.”²¹

Cultivating Excellence of Character

In times when people are not only rude and utterly disrespectful but also proud of it, underlining the importance of mutual respect is not empty rhetoric. It warns us and explains much of what we see in the current discourse. It responds to the cynics, urging them not to belittle virtues. On the contrary, it underlines the centrality of shame when virtues are absent.

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We need a lesson from ordinary people, rooted in common sense. For one, common sense reminds us that we can live with inconsistencies; what makes a structure real is knowing we cannot grasp it. We can only fully grasp the artificial.²³ This insistence on perfectly knit narratives traps us in perfect but narrow circle logic.²⁴ Seeing them as lived “habitus” that tolerate inconsistencies keeps us sane. Second, our common sense and social intuition already highlight the importance of mutual respect, polite manners, and aesthetics. When people encounter others in a respectful, personal way, they tend to let go of rigid narratives.

²⁰ Popper seemed to have been a very stubborn man, reluctant to change his opinion, even when proven wrong. See the story depicted in David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein’s Poker: The Story of a Ten-Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers* (Ecco, 2001).

²¹ Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, 77-78.

²² Byung-Chul Han, *Ohne Respekt: Eine soziale Krise* (Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2026) (Without Respect – A social crises), Matthes & Seitz Berlin (in German), especially 11 and pp. 40–45. (my translation of terms from German).

²³ See Andrew Collier, *An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar’s Philosophy* (Verso, 1994), 107-134.

²⁴ G. K Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (B&H Academics, 2022/1908), 21.

Face-to-face interactions humanize us, while other forms of communication, especially on anonymous social media platforms, dehumanize us, allowing us to be more rude, disrespectful, and shameless. The poisonous discourse on these platforms shows why portraying raw honesty as a virtue (“I am just telling you the truth”) misses the point. In our encounters, virtual or face-to-face, we need manners that create a healthy distance between us, allowing us to remain unavailable where we want and to maintain agency over what to reveal and what to conceal. These guarantee dignity and thus humanization.²⁵

But how can we use these seemingly superficial aspects – this external aesthetics of human interaction – to change character and virtues? Aren’t our actions a reflection of our inner selves? Daniel Miller articulately shows in his iconic book *Stuff* that it may also be accurate to view our inner selves as products of our possessions and actions.²⁶ Religious rituals often lead to deeper religiosity. Individuals who take pride in their domestic environments often have intact social lives, just as those who dress in professional attire tend to conduct themselves more professionally. Smoking decreases on smoke-free campuses, and people tend to keep restrooms as clean as they found them (but not cleaner). By extension, if we create conditions that encourage individuals to demonstrate certain virtues, we can expect their behavior to align with and cultivate these.

Sari Nusseibeh introduces the concept of “*husn al khulq*,” which does not translate to English easily, and that I, for lack of a better word, have been calling “excellence of character.” Nusseibeh defines it as one of the three pillars of the philosophical method. The other two pillars are cognitive: awareness and flexibility. He distinguishes between two components of excellence of character: 1) the soul’s noble virtues, such as justice, truthfulness, generosity, and mercy; and 2) adherence to the principles of etiquette and conduct when dealing with others. It is the mastery of traits such as forbearance, patience, and breadth of heart.²⁷ The power of excellence of character is best explained by Nusseibeh himself:

“[...] excellence of character is not [...] a necessary condition for sound reasoning. Because, as we said before, a genius (nābigħa) is a genius. He might also be crazy, and he might belong in prison rather than to sit down and converse with. But there is no doubt that excellence of character can be a

²⁵ G. K Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (B&H Academics, 2022/1908), 20–24.

²⁶ Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Polity, 2010). Miller brings extensive examples to show the connectedness between objects and psychology, e.g. examples of clothing, housing, and burial rituals. In one example he shows how people with more decorated homes tend to have intact social lives, see p. 87. See also Hajo Adam and Adam D. Galinsky, “Enclothed Cognition,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (2012): 918–25.

²⁷ Nusseibeh, *الكشاف: أو الفلسفة ونحن* (*The Scout, or Philosophy and Us*), 48-55.

*sufficient condition for sound reasoning [... not necessarily] in order to become a genius (nābigha), but in order to interact with others, function within society, so that society can interact within itself and improve, not suddenly or immediately, but gradually, through development and education/upbringing.*²⁸

Excellence of character is what grants us the skill to control ourselves, to expand the breadth of our hearts. For example, Nusseibeh tells us of a married couple who have a dispute, and one side decides not to keep arguing, despite believing he is right. It is not about feigning acceptance and yielding. It is about realizing that our social lives are not a game in which one defeats the other, but an interaction between human beings that want to win someone over (not to win over her).²⁹ Another beautiful example is the “mother [who] does not teach her children new words by force or coercion, but rather by kindness and tolerance.”³⁰ We can also call this skill tact: the ability to see things from the other person’s perspective and adjust our behavior accordingly.

Excellence of character is the ingredient that successful deliberation requires. We intuitively grasp it and know that we can cultivate it. To do that, we need more environments that help us master tact, etiquette, and polite conduct. These will, in turn, nurture the soul’s inner virtues, such as justice, truthfulness, grace, and mutual respect. We must create more spaces where people are expected to show excellence of character, be courteous, listen, care about how they come across, and be ashamed of lacking virtues. That is where traditions and rituals can help us create aesthetically beautiful, genuinely warm, and inviting spaces where manners matter. A simple example of such a ritual occurs in church. The faithful are asked to give each other the sign of peace before communion. We find similar wisdom in Islamic, Jewish, and secular traditions. These acts do not automatically eliminate hate, but they dispose people toward reconciliation. They open hearts.

The recommended model is obviously not a “be-all-and-end-all” truth either. Of course, there is place for the Dionysian, for prophetic rage that “overturns the tables” of those that desecrate the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). This is not a call to yield to injustice, but a reminder of the centrality of shame. After all, the shameless seem to be the powerful, the

²⁸ See podcast with Nusseibeh: Notre Dame Jerusalem, “Episode 2: The Need of Society (حاجة المجتمع),” *The Scout*, n.d., <https://thescout.buzzsprout.com/2531279/episodes/17747145-episode-2-the-need-of-society/>. (my translation from Arabic, not the AI generated one in the transcript).

²⁹ Nusseibeh, *الكشاف: أو الفلسفة ونحن* (*The Scout, or Philosophy and Us*), 50. (my translation from Arabic). See also Sari Nusseibeh, *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 202.

³⁰ Nusseibeh, *الكشاف: أو الفلسفة ونحن* (*The Scout, or Philosophy and Us*), 115. (my translation from Arabic).

protected, the privileged, all those who dominate the public discourse. Their disrespectful behavior is not legitimate prophetic rage. It is shamelessness. It is a culture that breeds blind rage in a world saturated by violence. It resembles what Homer called “*mēnis*,”³¹ a terrible righteous wrath that leads to no good, only our own demise. In any case, it does not enable successful deliberation.

Conclusion

Within Your Gates: The Forum for the Universal Vocation of Jerusalem was introduced as a deliberation platform that seeks truth while giving primacy to the common good of all. At the forum's first board meeting, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa drew on a quotation from the Book of Exodus (24:7) that captures the essence of this essay perfectly. After hearing Moses read the book of the covenant, the people affirmed: “*we will do, and we will hear*” (*na'aseh v'nishma*). Notice that they act and only then listen and understand. This aligns with the argument I have been trying to convey that action may prompt virtues.³²

May “Within Your Gates” offer a space for deliberation that goes beyond well-intentioned dialogue that skirts any controversy while rejecting deliberation as another channel of the conflict. To do that, we must shape it as a place in which virtues such as justice, truthfulness, and shame can be cultivated. That means less intellectual posturing, less “be-all-and-end-all” frameworks, less in-your-face raw honesty, and more civilized, personal encounters where tact, humility, and mutual respect matter. This alone will not restore justice or resolve the conflict, but it could be our small contribution to a more inclusive “*habitus*” of deliberation.

³¹ See Iliad 1:1 in Homer and Sheila Murnaghan, *Iliad*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1997). See introduction, xvii-xix.

³² See also Jonathan Sacks, “We Will Do and We Will Hear,” *Covenant & Conversation*, <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/mishpatim/we-will-do-and-we-will-hear/>.