



WITHIN YOUR GATES

בשעריך פי אבובים

This Land is Ours: Revisited

Author(s): Sari Nusseibeh

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What role does or should language have in conflict situations, such as that in Israel-Palestine? This was the question I was tasked with thinking about when I first participated in the special discussion groups organized by this Forum.

My automatic reaction to this question at the time was to highlight the ambiguous role of declarative sentences. Essentially, this was to alert us that we shouldn't take it for granted that these convey facts about the world we might wish to know, but that they are *acts* used by the speaker to fulfill some totally different purpose we should look out for. The examples I picked to explain my point were disparate, if political, but they were not tied to the history of this conflict, making it important for me now to attempt to, in fact, so tie them. For this, let me begin with the following example from our history: to woo Palestinians into accepting his so-called 'Letter of Assurances' as a condition for the Madrid negotiations Secretary of State James Baker found out after a discussion with them and others that using the term "self-government" is closer to their hearts than the expression 'autonomy' he had started his proposal with (mention of 'government' helped them deceive themselves that an actual state is in the offing).¹ His purpose –to woo them into accepting the invitation to Madrid – was thereby fulfilled by substituting one expression with its synonym.

Several questions come to mind when considering that incident. Are meanings of words ambivalent in the first place? Are these better defined by the contexts in which they are used? By the speaker using them? By the listener? Whatever we decide, these questions (and the answers to them) suddenly make us begin to lose trust in what we grew up believing was the natural and proper use of a declarative sentence – namely, to express some objective fact in the world. We generally work under the assumption that such sentences must be either true or false.

¹ Find a text of that letter here: [interactive encyclopedia of the palestine question – palquest | u.s. letter of assurances to the palestinians.](#)

Secretary Baker's choice of expression (and our objective judgment of it at the time) did not seem to be a play on that binary. Strictly speaking, after all, the two expressions (autonomy and self-government) are intersubstitutable, keeping the sentence's truth-value unchanged. But taking the wider view, we can in retrospect realize that our binary judgment of the sentence at hand was misplaced...that Secretary Baker's purpose in making it was to *woo* his interlocutors, which he succeeded in doing. The act was successful, of course, because the audience fell for it, allowing themselves (subconsciously?) to be wooed! One wonders how much we are more generally wooed or affected by what we hear.

We nowadays find ourselves in the public discourse space we occupy, filled to the brim with political declarations shooting down at us from a plethora of dazzling media outlets, bedazzled by those supposedly innocent information-providing sentences that, intentionally or otherwise, serve to obscure rather than clarify the world around us. Should we believe them? How would we verify them? Or should we instead look for their effects on us to make a proper judgment of them? What standard or measure should we fall back on as we do this?

Whichever we decide, we find ourselves part of the discourse as agents or actors, whether as academics or anyway as pre-set pieces in the game. As such, we already come to it armored with how we already see the world. Do we see it, really? Or do we just see what we make of it? Indeed, is there a world out there beyond what we make of it, and beyond what we grew to believe in, helped along by the trust we put in the declarative sentences that we were fed with and that had settled over time deep in our minds and hearts, and that sowed a certain vision of it?

I once had a shocking experience during a first-time meeting with an Israeli minister. I had gone to discuss Israel's non-recognition of the degrees we granted at the university I once worked in. It so happened that at that time Palestinian and Israeli teams were meeting in some European capital to discuss the issue of Palestinian refugees. The minister seemed anxious over whether an agreement between the two teams would be found. I nonchalantly tried to sweep the anxiety aside by suggesting that, of course, a way would be found, since all I expected our team to demand was Israel's recognition of the principle of the right of Palestinians to return to the homeland, rather than a demand for their unconditional actual return. The minister at that moment jumped up from her chair! Did I expect her to accept that Israel was born in sin, she asked with disbelieving eyes? Because that – a total rejection of Israel's narrative about its puritanical conception – was exactly what I said implied. This could never be, the minister declared.

The incident taught me, at some political cost to myself, to openly declare at a later point that our demand for a two-state solution does not include the demand for the return of the refugees. In the face of criticism by compatriots, I tried to confront this first by distinguishing between individual and collective rights, and then by arguing that the collective right for freedom and independence trumps the individual right of return – a willful tweaking of rights, I said, which is all too common in so many of our quotidian decisions.

Though I thought my argument was sound, it did not go far in convincing my compatriot interlocutors. The right of return was untouchable, they would argue back: ‘The Palestinians *have* the right of return’ is not just a fact; it is an unbreakable and indivisible moral principle. As such, it does not submit to logical or political rules: it has its own!

I could see that trying to break the deadlock in the argument was a well-nigh impossible mission, much more than it would have been had I, who believed in the right of return, argued the issue with the Minister at the time! Was the right of return not only an indelible fact, but a principle? Was an immaculate Israeli conception an equally indelible fact? Or were these simply strongly held beliefs? Either way, their mutual exclusivity seemed as firm as that affecting two actual but contradictory facts! I soon recalled that my conversation with the minister (and later with my compatriots) would not have taken place had another ‘indelible principle’ held over time (Oslo’s recognition of the PLO as a negotiation partner) not been shelved and forgotten. Clearly, it seemed to me, some issues that are unsettled – true facts – sometimes just lose their significance or fade away from the conversation, or from use, maybe to crop up at a later time, and maybe not! But, more significantly, some strongly declarative statements that are made out to define reality and presume to express facts that are etched in it turn out, in effect, to be ones that themselves etch (and then brush away) that reality! In retrospect, we often consider such statements in science as ones of justified belief, and explain those affecting our daily lives as ones defining different cultural epochs. It is as if such statements are more like passing clouds that, depending on one’s socio-geographic and temporal coordinates, some see, and some do not, or some see, and others see their opposite. But if they were more like clouds, and not etched in reality (the sky itself), then wouldn’t they themselves be more like what our statements in fact *make* rather than – as we suppose – just describe or *declare*? After all, it is such statements that define our *lived* reality.

The hypothesis is muddling! Since such and similar declarative statements are etched as clouds in people’s minds and they clearly constitute building blocks in larger belief-structures of a community the temptation to consider them when communally used as ‘performative’ – i.e. as playing active rather than declarative roles – seems to be as strong as when we consider

single cases of speech acts (consider, for example, national or religious narratives whose role is to “refill” our view of the world in our children). This is already vouched for in the relevant literature –where communities rather than individuals are considered as speech agents. As already said, we enter the game of language – especially that within which we grow up – as pieces in a set that are already armored with what we see. The armor accumulates over time, built up piece by piece, even as we engage with each other in speaking and arguing. The clouds created by our speech, which we visualize as one part of reality or another, pass above us, often gently and harmlessly floating past each other, but at other times they collide, creating storms and thunder. However, taking this hypothesis one step further, it might seem very odd to us that language could just be a tool with which we make the practical world we live in, and then come to see it as we made it, often without realizing our agency in this operation! Does this oddity not mean that where one sees injustice, all one sees is a cloud which others can see as justice, or where we see aggression and land aggrandizement, others can see justified self-defense? That, in other words, the world is of itself a totally neutral white slate which we paint over (or cloud) with our own and different brushes? Aren’t there independent truths out there, beyond the reach of our language? Surely, justice and injustice, or what is right and what is not, cannot simply be different points of view! Above the clouds, the sky itself must surely be arranged in a well-defined order.

I was once drawn to an allegorical story written by the Brethren of Purity (10th–11th century) in Baghdad, which they called ‘The case of Animals against Humans.’² In it, a group of human beings arrives on board a ship to an island inhabited only by animals, which is lorded over by the King of Jinn himself and his minions. Soon after their arrival, the human contingent begins to put the animals they found to their use, depriving them of the natural lives they had formerly enjoyed. The animals, clearly feeling unjustly treated by humans, decide to take their complaint to the King, and a court is held forthwith where both sides are allowed to defend their respective positions. The proceedings cover every argument that one side or the other could bring to the table – natural, rational, and religious. The King asks his counselor at the end to sum up the debate and show which of the two sides is right or has the better case. Curiously, the counselor leaves the matter in a suspended state, declining to support either side, as if to say it is irrelevant which side has justice on its side! But then, with what seems to be a non-sequitur conclusion,

² Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, Lenn Evan Goodman, and Richard J. A. McGregor. (2009). *The Case of the Animals Versus Man Before the King of the Jinn: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 22*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

he proceeds to proclaim at the end of his deposition that human beings have the edge over animals only because amongst them are found those few who can elevate themselves above their material station and will seek to partake of the spiritual divinity of the world around them.

Is no side right? Are both sides right? That is not the issue the king's advisor had intimated! But it's a stunning revelation! The real issue, the counselor had said, is not what *the case is*, nor is it the logic of the contending arguments. It is the nature of the human spirit! What was the company present (or the reader) to make of that? Was it that, however each side presents its conflicting narrative of the world, the real world, or solution, or win, lies elsewhere? My mind travels back to Secretary Baker and his gigantic effort to woo both sides to the table in Madrid. He had to resort to more linguistic ploys in this effort, but it was the first time in history that Israel and the PLO, the latter, be it in a watered-down form, sat at the table with world leaders in a show of commitment to making peace between them. At the conference itself, each side, of course, had its story to tell, but the seed was already sown, and a new trajectory for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was etched into the world. Was this not an example of the human spirit the king's advisor had in mind? For yes, we had the spirit of Genghis Khan in history, who plundered the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad and further afield (though only to have his seed in later centuries cultivating an Islamic revival in Asia). Still, we also have that other human spirit that seeks peace and brotherhood among nations – the spirit shining in brilliance we see in the image of Jesus Christ, or the one scattered around the world. Gandhi tells his interlocutor in *Achisma* that the spirit of peace far outnumbers the spirit of war, and that is found in the small but numerous acts of kindness found among people. We all know the difference between these spirits. Indeed, we may believe that even Benjamin Netanyahu believes (or has convinced himself he thinks he believes) in conquering evil, though – in a rather odd reference to the pillaging warlord Genghis – contradictorily concluding it can only be brought about by the evil of pillage and plunder. But, returning to our hypothesis, isn't the screen before us black and white? Isn't the sky above us clear and well-ordered? I don't believe the wise Jinn was denying that. He was simply pointing to how the mountain before us could be overcome.

What I imagine him calling upon us to do is to look beyond the clouds or reality we see in the sky above us...to free ourselves from what we made up in the first place for ourselves to see, and that to etch an alternative and better cloud formation for ourselves, one that may or may not correspond with an order in the sky itself, but which anyway would lift us over and beyond the cul-de-sac we are presently facing. It is not fancy advice. I recently came across a book "How to Fall in Love with the Future" by an environmental activist (Rob Hopkins) who

is part of a wider and growing movement in Britain and Europe that ‘experiments’ with groups of people living in various derelict urban areas and towns by making them imagine themselves into the future they desire and then looking back to compare that wonderful future with their glum present.³ Imagining their future environments together becomes a prelude to organizing themselves to bring that future about. The imaginative ‘time-travel’ exercise to the future helps them free themselves from being captive to what they presently see around them, replacing it with that which they would love to have. It is a prompt to make that future happen! The call to live such lives seems to have far sounder logic than that of calling two sides to bring to the debating table their conflicting reasons for why one self-made confinement in their lives is better than another. However, the disparate clouds presently dividing our communities seem to make joint ‘future dreams’ exercises a dream itself. So, once again we ask ourselves, is there a use of language that can bring it closer, or is the path blocked before us? It is here we have to wrestle with the reality we make up for ourselves! Where and how is positive impact on this, or by this, possible?

Let me here introduce the expression ‘language street’ to mean all the voices, private and public, that fill out our discourse space. We realize that our ‘language street’ is not isolated or strictly local. It is filled with both local and global voices. Palestinians, Israelis, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others, from home or abroad, all participate in our discourse. It is also not one layer. People at different levels interact in the street, in workplaces, in hospitals, at roadblocks, and much more, as they do in seminars, on screens, on social media, at public gatherings, and elsewhere. In short, our language street is a hotchpotch. In the last meeting of this forum, we mulled over words that open or close hearts, our implicit and justified assumption being that we, as users of those words, had ‘good spirits’ and open hearts. We cannot, of course, cover or vouch for all the voices in our multi-faceted language street, especially when the discourse is about politics, for many of these voices consider themselves to be actively engaged in battle, where winning points (e.g., approval of an audience) is what often counts more than resolving disputes. Nor can we vouch for the sincerity of well-sounding speeches and promises, for we know that a civil conversation that uses alluring words may be the best tool an ill-meaning interlocutor could use (just as a well-meaning interlocutor could use stinging language!). But there are two layers of our language street that we can learn from,

³ Hopkins, Rob. (2025). *How to Fall in Love with the Future: A Time Traveller’s Guide to Changing the World*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.

and perhaps influence: one being the discourse and interaction of common people in the non-political public space (which can also be vile). The second is the discourse in formal negotiations. About the former, it is significant in a Gandhi-like way to note that in what is a violently enforced but ‘ill-formed binary formula’ of Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land, we are witness to numerous acts of kindness, care, and respect among ordinary people in many ordinary walks of life. These are encouraged by the voices of well-meaning intellectuals, academics, novelists, artists, social activists, and many others. The weight of this layer in the language street for the formation of a future outlook that could be cultivated is indispensable.

The negotiation layer of the language street is trickier and is both essential and ‘expository’. The so-called Washington talks between the two sides were launched with the international blessings of the Madrid conference. They soon stalled over the differences between the Israeli and Palestinian versions of what was to be an interim self-governing authority – acronymed ISGA and PISGA, respectively. Here we go back to Secretary Baker’s linguistic ploy, and its failure at this stage of the initiative: ISGA drew up an interim self-governing authority plan that did not spell out a Palestinian State at the end, while PISGA drew up one designed to end with a Palestinian State. Bickering over the details of an interim period without an agreed outcome quickly seemed pointless to both sides.⁴ (Almost thirty years later, the Americans shyly included in their internationally supported Gaza peace plan a clause to the effect that “the *aspiration* of the Palestinians for a State” is recognized! This aspiration-predicated recognition somehow mollified Arab governments, as well as what had become over time a meek Palestinian Authority).

What we have at this layer is a political language crafted intricately to represent two fixed but opposed political positions. These positions are crafted by official governments or leaderships. There are good reasons to argue that the practicality or meaningfulness of the official Palestinian position has eroded over time and is likely to erode further under the Gaza Peace Plan and the irreversible march of history. What can language do to change that? Arguably, one could enlist international and human rights legal language, supported perhaps by rising international public voices, including Jewish ones at home and abroad, with a view to pressing for and perhaps eventually affecting Israel’s official position against the two-state solution. But there is a delicate balance to keep in mind while this is happening between such external pressure and local public attitudes: what one local public may feel gleeful about

⁴ See the text here: [interactive encyclopedia of the palestine question – palquest | declaration of principles on interim self-government arrangements \(oslo i accord\)](#).

another public may feel threatened by (in our last meeting we considered as red flags some such examples, as ‘genocide,’ ‘settler colonialism,’ etc.). In a chicken-and-egg situation, unless the leaderships in both publics were to speak the same language, their respective publics will remain divided. Unless both publics see eye to eye on what needs to be said and done, their respective leaderships may, jointly or separately, be unwilling to cross the red lines. As already indicated, it is our language that defines what we see!

In a flashback to the 1970s, we witnessed a significant departure from the reality we had created for ourselves: President Sadat’s visit to Israel and his speech in the Knesset, where he spoke of rupturing the psychological barrier between the two sides and walking through it. It was a magical moment. To be fair to the other side, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert also walked through that glass door separating the two realities during his final year in office, but unfortunately did not find the designated person on the other side to meet him. These incidents take us back to the King’s counselor and to something we already knew: that it is less the language than the human vision, over or through the barrier, that can ‘see’ beyond what seem to be insoluble knots and make the difference. To make its imprint on the skies above us and turn it from mirage to reality, that ‘seen’ landscape must be accompanied by faith in its existence, and therefore by a strong will to bring it about. Our language street may be our everyday laboratory. Still, no guarantee that walking along it will lead us to the destination we long for: a well-formed formula for our binary existence!