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# ON MEMORY, NARRATIVE AND FORGIVENESS

Rachel Tzvia Back

DEAR EDITORS:

I've just returned to Israel from a conference on "Memory, Narrative and Forgiveness: Reflecting on Ten Years of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission" [in Capetown, South Africa, November

2006] to find your call for submissions on reconciliation and alternatives to war. How wonderful that you are devoting an issue to this theme; so much at the Capetown conference spoke exactly to that. Sadly, I don't think I'll have time to fully write of my experiences before your deadline (I came home

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this letter to Bridges, the author summarizes her experiences at a conference in Capetown South Africa on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The conference focused on trans generational transmission of trauma and included presentations by apartheid era survivors and perpetrators as well as second-generation Holocaust survivors and perpetrators and by Eva Moses Korr, a survivor of Mengele's experiments on twins.*

to family illnesses demanding my time and energy), so I'll just note a few names and ideas that stood out.

In addition to South Africa's story (I saw video footage of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the first time and kept wondering why I hadn't seen any earlier), the stories of second-generation Holocaust survivors and perpetrators were most profoundly present. Indeed, the focus on the trans-generational transmission of trauma was intense, disturbing and (of course) appropriate. Our stories have become our children's stories—our pain and prejudices have become (or will become) theirs, and I wondered throughout the four-day conference about the generations of healing necessary after each war and every horror.

I gave a paper on a local initiative—Galilean Jews and Palestinians meeting to share their narratives. What bonds us in this group, its *raison d'être*, is that the Jews (myself among them) live on land where a Palestinian village stood until 1948. (The people of Mi'ar, the village in question, were evacuated from their homes during the fighting of Israel's War of Independence and were never allowed to return. The village was eventually destroyed.) The Arabs of our group are all descendants of that village, and they still view Mi'ar as home. It is, as you can imagine, a powerful and emotionally charged story. As far as we know, this type of encounter between Arabs dispossessed of their land and Jews now living on that land has never before taken place. But there is hope, a hope embedded in the ability to acknowledge wrongdoings, the ability and desire to feel each other's pain, losses and fears. The initiative is small and local, but significant nonetheless, and one looks for hope where one can...

(The story of Palestinians on the Israeli

side of the Green Line is little known and often confused with that of Palestinians in the territories occupied by Israel after the 1967 war. They are not the same story.)

The closing plenary of the conference was delivered by Eva Moses Kor, one of the twins experimented on by Mengele. She is the subject of a new documentary, *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*—we viewed a brief extract of the film, which was moving and deeply provocative. A small woman, her speech still marked by her Eastern-European origins, Moses Kor spoke about the decision to forgive Mengele as a turning point in her life, as an empowering and liberating moment. What also impressed me about her was that with all she had seen and also endured, she spoke with a gentle and embracing humor.

Another very interesting presentation was delivered by Ilona Kuphal, who is part of a group called One by One—they promote dialogue between descendants of Holocaust survivors and descendants of Nazi perpetrators. Similar efforts to build bridges between erstwhile enemies, and between victims and perpetrators, have become the life-work of a white South African woman, Ginn Fourie. Fourie, whose teenage daughter was killed in an ANC attack on a pub, spoke of her decision to seek out the man who ordered the attack and, together with him, found a center working toward reconciliation on both sides.

Maria Ntuli and Lizzie Sefolo, both mothers of the Mamelodi 10 (ten township youth killed in 1986, their bodies torched to prevent identification), shared their stories with us, as they had at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ten years earlier—stories of searching for lost beloveds, of uncovering the terrible tales of their beloveds' deaths. These women seemed heroic to me. One of the women who works with these African women

apartheid survivors is Brigid Hess from the University of South Africa. She facilitated encounters between them and the white men who gave orders to “disappear” their children, or actually did the killing themselves. In one of the conference’s sessions, we witnessed an unscheduled meeting between a group of these women and Adriaan Vlok, the minister for Law and Order in the final years of the apartheid regime. The encounter was charged, disturbing and evidence that the healing and the taking responsibility both are unfinished processes. I don’t know what has been reported of these encounters, but the stories deserve to be known, read, and circulated. The capacity of these women to forgive was—is—astonishing. (The word “forgiveness” was central in the conference—and to the TRC itself, certainly. I felt it sometimes foreign—as in, very Christian, and the Christian framework was palpable—but still I’m intrigued and demand of myself to think more about this.) A documentary on one of these women has been made by a Jewish South African film-

maker and activist, Mark Kaplan, called *Between Joyce and Remembrance*. We saw an excerpt of the movie—very powerful—presented by Kaplan himself, a soft-spoken man who came across as humbled by what he was documenting.

As for Israel/Palestine—beside myself, there was only one other representative from this region (an Israeli man). This absence of more Israeli voices, and of any Palestinian voices, was noted, and painful to acknowledge. Clearly we are so far from reconciliation in this region that the conference itself may have been viewed as irrelevant. Still, I hope that in future conferences of this nature, representatives of important and brave Israeli-Palestinian groups such as Combatants for Peace and the Bereaved Parents Circle will speak their stories of seeking alternatives to violence and revenge, of reaching toward reconciliation and peace.

I close with my warmest wishes.  
B’shalom