

Recognizing The Original Sin

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A few days after the violent events which took place in Israel's Arab community, there are more and more voices in mainstream Israeli society calling for a new beginning, one which would bring about the genuine integration of the Palestinian citizens of Israel into the life of the state and of society. At the end of last week, the Shin Bet internal security service publicized the main parts of a report which calls for such civic integration. In an interview with Channel Two, former Shin Bet chief Ami Ayalon made unprecedented declarations about the need to forgo the use of strength and about the vital necessity for civic integration. The tone of Minister of Science, Culture and Sport Matan Vilnai and of Prime Minister Ehud Barak on this subject has also become more moderate. Even in the press there were several articles calling for a new agenda. Perhaps these are signs presaging a welcome end to the national sport of making declarations about symmetry - statements that so many members of the so-called moderate Jewish camp have made in recent weeks, blatantly ignoring the historical and political background of the situation. If that is so, perhaps we are on the brink of an important change. The direction of civic integration - which several academic researchers specializing in the field have been advocating for a long time - is turning out to be the only option. For years such ideas have been consistently rejected by the people who determine government policy toward the Arabs. Perhaps the reality which has been exposed, and its dangers - first and foremost the danger that Israel will be witness to a horrifying act of ethnic cleansing - will provide an opening for change on the part of policy makers. Without such a change, the entire move is likely to remain a dead letter. We must take advantage of the window of opportunity, give practical form to the hazy idea, and carry out at least some of the proposed changes before the next flare-up. The first step, which does not require a great investment but which could clear the air, should be formal recognition on the part of the government of the price paid

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by the Palestinians in 1948 - including those who became citizens of the state. The shadow of 1948 hovers constantly over the Arabs in Israel, and it is playing a part in the present conflagration as well. The intensity of their anger, and the willingness they demonstrated to rebel against the state, are profoundly and convolutedly connected to Israeli insistence on denying the part played by the founding of the State of Israel in the tragedies and dislocations they went through. The Jewish public in Israel, self-centered and insensitive, consistently forgets that its state is built on the destruction of another nation. This public refuses to remember that many Palestinians, almost overnight, turned into citizens of a state they didn't want and which was forced on them. There is a danger in this forgetfulness: It is responsible for the illusion of normality, and for the naive belief that 50-year-old events are an episode which is over.

The truth is just the opposite. An original sin which is not dealt with, and which is not exposed, is like an internal wound which is not tended to. When one tries to cover and suppress it, it festers, turning the layers above it into a garbage dump, exactly like that which the country is now slogging through.

The State of Israel must acknowledge the loss felt for over five decades by one fifth of its citizens, those who lost loved ones, were deprived of assets, saw their villages destroyed and their relatives struggling against humiliation and poverty in exile. Jewish society in Israel, which has no rivals when it comes to awareness of the importance of memory and the memorializing of suffering, must recognize the tragedy of those who paid a high price for its rebirth. If we want a historic reconciliation, and no longer a temporary cease fire, this is essential.

In the Jewish community, including the liberal left, which feels betrayed and disappointed by the violent form of protest taken up by the Arabs in Israel, there are those who say that this is not the right time for such a move. This is a dangerous mistake. There is no more suitable time than these days for a symbolic move showing recognition of Arab suffering, a move which could change the destructive momentum in which we now find ourselves.

We must call upon the proper government authorities to soon present for government approval ideas for recording and memorializing the sites of the 400 Palestinian villages which were destroyed in 1948, for proper care of their ruins (including mosques and churches), for

legislation which would set an official memorial day for the Palestinian tragedy, and perhaps even for a change of the national anthem and the flag, in a way which would give Arab citizens of the state a feeling of inclusion rather than rejection.

Such a move, if it is begun immediately, would be an essential symbolic preface to the variety of steps and changes in practical policy which are now needed in order to mend the rift. It can serve as a first, confidence-building step, a way to heal the deep wounds which threaten to destroy hearts from within. After it is on the table, we will be able to start the essential task of mending the broken bones, in a different atmosphere.