The slow death of a dream

I have watched over a lifetime as my father, first expelled from Palestine in 1948, nurtured a dream of returning to the West Bank and building his home there. Even after he did built it, the Israelis prevented him from settling there for good

Leila Farsakh

Alex Levac

The smell of sadness overwhelms the place. Palestine is sad and so is my father.

For the first time I face the fact that my father might die and that his death will pain me. For the first time I confront the idea of his loss, and the loss of Palestine. I no longer run away from it, no longer hide behind my anger in order not to face this loss.

I held so much anger against my father: anger for not having seen me, for all that cannot be said between us, for all that needs to be said and won't be... angry at the cancer that is creeping into his body again; at his fall, this man who was larger than life, but who is now so scared, so sad, and so weak... I realize that my days with him are numbered. I see him saying goodbye slowly, every night, every time I visit. I watch him reverting to being a 2-year-old boy who wants somebody to help him go to the bathroom, wash him, assist him in his ablutions for the five prayers of the day, and that is hard... I can for once see his pain.

It is hard for him to walk, hard for him to read or to drink his coffee without a sippy cup, but I cannot help thinking that he could make an effort, he could do better, he did not need to let himself fall, he did not need to abdicate his life. And then I think, what is there left for him in the life that he is abdicating, as death knocks at his door and calls to him?

My father fought all his life for Palestine, so he could be a free man and build a brilliant future: one in which Palestine would be free, the Arab world united, his people literate and advanced. He saw Palestine lost twice: once when he was 15 years old, as Israel established itself during the Nakba ("catastrophe") of the 750,000 Palestinians in 1947-1948, and a second time when he was 34, as Israel conquered the West Bank and Gaza, and forbade him from returning to his home for over 27 years.

He was chased out of Jordan during Black September in 1970, and yet still persevered to go to the Gulf and build a new business and raise his family. A life in exile, a home he never acknowledged or felt secure in, but still built with all his might. He raised four kids and told us about Palestine, saved enough money to finance our education – the only "capital" Palestinians were sure never to lose, as he liked to say. He helped the family and the clan to rise above poverty and ignorance, to remain steadfast in the land of olives and figs. He became a known figure in the Levantine ghetto he had no choice but to join, in the pearl of the Gulf, and still dreamt of going home.

But he finally did come home: In 1994, he returned for the first time to his native town in the West Bank, to build the house he always wanted, the only house that would not be transitory. I had just gotten married, and had moved to the United States to live with my husband. Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin had shaken hands in front of the White House and launched the Oslo peace process, which promised some sort of an end to the exile.

My father returned to build his house on the piece of land that he purchased with his own money in the 1960s – money he had saved while working in the sun in 1950s Kuwait, dreaming of leaving the cities of salt to return home. He bought the piece of land adjacent to the field he used to play in with his brothers as a boy, beside the grape vines that hid the snakes and scorpions that he loved to chase. It was to be the house he had promised my mother, his young European wife, when she first visited: the house that he would build her brick by brick, majestic and grand, worthy of all the sacrifices she was about to make.

He finally built that house when he was 65, on top of the hill overlooking the wide horizon and glimpses of the sea near Jaffa and Tel Aviv, a pompous villa standing among undulating hills. It was as if he were making a statement, bearing witness to all that he went through, all that he achieved, all that he wanted the world to know. He had come home and he was there to stay.

But the beautiful house he constructed became the prison he inhabited. He laid the foundations of the house in 1999. By then the occupation was supposed to have come to an end, the struggle for self-determination to come to fruition, the Palestinian state to materialize. But the second intifada erupted in 2000, and he and my mother moved into the new house on September 11, 2001. He could not have known that the Twin Towers in New York were about to be destroyed and change the course of Middle East peace. The occupation intensified, did not weaken, and hundreds of checkpoints were installed all over the West Bank and Gaza. Donkeys became the means of transportation between villages and towns, and Israel Air Force Apache helicopters targeted civilians in broad daylight.

Just as my father thought he was preparing for a peaceful retirement in his homeland, he was unable and unwilling to venture beyond the barbed wire, the eight-foot-high wall, and the institutionalized checkpoint terminals at the border crossing points that cut the West Bank off from Israel and also divided it into more than eight population reserves.

The struggle was no longer how to end the occupation but simply about how to reach Ramallah or Nablus. Steadfastness was no longer about building a viable independent state but about how to endure the humiliating checkpoints in order to get to work or reach the doctor. The dream was no longer of returning to Haifa, but of staying alive within the walls, within reservations imposed on the residents by the Israelis.

Life seems to have nothing more to offer my father. The occupation he fought has imprisoned him. The wall it constructed has curtailed his horizon and that of his people. The checkpoints it created sucked the air out of him, his compatriots and their 100-year-long struggle for independence.

I worried about my parents, but did not question their perseverance. I too was indignant, as I worked in the United States on disseminating the facts and combating what came to be described as Israeli apartheid. I visited my parents at least twice a year, but I wanted them to come and see me as well. It was hard, though, for my father to travel so far, both physically and emotionally. He worried that if he left, the Israeli authorities wouldn't let him back in.

From 1998 to 2008 my father waited for an Israeli residence permit that would allow him to live legally in his native village in the West Bank. For 10 years, he traveled back and forth every three months between Jordan and Palestine, a drive of just an hour and a half, because the Israeli authorities wouldn't give him more than a three-month tourist visa. He would often wait for two weeks at a time in Amman, where he visited my sister. It was a city he never liked, one he described as a vampire that only flourished by sucking the blood of refugees. For eight years, he packed the same suitcase, filled it with my mother's indispensable cigarettes, the special milk powder that is cheaper in Amman than in the West Bank, and tried again to cross the Allenby Bridge, named after the British general who conquered Palestine in 1918 to give the Zionists a state.

For a decade, he would work hard to hide his terrible anxiety as he boarded the bus to the Israeli entry point, praying to God that the Israeli army officer would let him and my mother in, give them the three-month visa or, if they were lucky, a six-month tourist visa. He never gave up hope that maybe the officer would tell him that he had finally been issued the permanent residence permit that he had applied for and so awaited – the one that would let him live permanently in his big home.

Until one day the Israeli authorities refused to let him in. My father hid his panic and went back to Amman, stayed there four more weeks, and tried again to enter Palestine, but the officers refused him again. My father returned to Amman again and decided to wait a few more weeks and then to fly into Tel Aviv instead of taking the bus to the Allenby Bridge. Maybe, he thought, it would be easier to get the three-month visa if he passed through the airport. He had a European passport, and the Israeli authorities were bound to be merciful and civilized with a 75-year-old man married to an elderly white woman, he thought. As he flew over Mount Nebo, the Promised Land below him, he spotted his house up on the hill from the plane and prayed fervently that all would go well.

But it did not. The immigration official at the airport to whom my father presented his passport could not understand why my father kept coming back to Israel over a decade, each time on a three-month visa. His superior officer could not comprehend my father's determination to exert his right to return home, and refused to let him through. My father pleaded, said he had abided by the Israeli rules, that he had applied for permanent residence a decade earlier. "I haven't been a threat," he told the officer, "I just want to be buried in my hometown."

The officer responded by ordering him and his European wife to be interrogated and deported, but not before they spent a night in a filthy detention cell with a bunk bed that smelled of urine. At 75, he was shipped back from the airport that lay on the destroyed Palestinian town of 1948 Lydda, to the city of Black September. I always thought that this trip is what killed his pride.

This happened in early 2008 as I was about to travel with my husband and daughter to the West Bank, to spend the year with my parents. Both of us were planning to teach at a Palestinian university. I was looking forward to seeing my friends and working with old colleagues, to waking up to the smell of thyme in the garden, to giving my daughter a chance to see the almond trees blossom, to hear her grandfather tell his stories and learn about her family as she baked anise cookies with my mother.

I was not expecting to have to pass through Amman in order to see my parents, to cross the bridge not knowing when and if they would join me, to enter their own house without them. By the time I arrived in Amman, my father had gone silent; he was always thirsty, became diabetic and lost all taste for life. He waited with my mother for five months and then decided to give it another try. They would cross through the Jordan Valley, again through the Allenby Bridge, and if they made it, he swore he would never leave again. They did make it through, and he has stayed put ever since.

He decided then to overstay his three-month-visa and thus became an illegal in his own home, under the law of the Israeli regime. But he did not care, or so he pretended, for he was there to stay.

Within a year, just a few months after the Gaza war of December 2008, the Israelis issued him and 1,500 other Palestinians the permanent residence permits they had been waiting for. Israel wanted to reward the Palestinian Authority for its compliance with the security plan devised by U.S. Security Coordinator Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton Dayton that kept Israel secure and the West Bank free of Hamas. Obtaining the right to return to one's home could not come without a slap to my father's prolonged national struggle for Palestinian unity and independence.

My father was relieved that he got the residence permit, happy to be carrying the green ID card. He was finally legal under the occupier's law, and nobody could kick him out of his home, not without force. That green card has his name on it in Arabic and Hebrew, his address, his date and place of birth. It has at its top the logo of the Palestinian National Authority and would look like a Palestinian ID were it not for all the Hebrew letters adjacent to each item listed on it and the computer code stamped on it by the Israeli security apparatus. It simply added insult to injury to be given these ID in green cards, reminiscent of those people burned in the first intifada in the 1980s as a sign of civil disobedience to Israel and its military rule. But there was no choice. Israel is still in command, even if its soldiers are not to be seen in Areas A or B. Palestine has not been liberated but rather imprisoned in new ways. My father's 64-year struggle for self-determination has not come to fruition; it has been smeared in the mud, with a vengeance.

And so my father has locked himself up in his majestic house. The occupation has become internalized as its soldiers, checkpoints, settlements and bypass roads metamorphosed into poison that cannot be objectified, touched or fought, and yet is everywhere, in the air. His life revolves around the cup of coffee he has daily with his gardener, the few walks he takes up and down the hill he has planted with jasmine and olive trees, and the TV he watches each night in bed beside his wife. In winter he busies himself with lighting the fireplace with such meticulousness that it always fails to light and warm the room he locks himself in. In summer, he sits in the garden and watches his granddaughters laugh and play. His only interest has become food, and his only comfort his bed, on which he lays for hours every day, a book beside him which he barely opens or reads.

He longed for his sons and daughters but could not look us, his own children, in the eye. He felt shy about no longer being the father he used to be, and we could not bear to see what he had become. We could no longer be the objects of his projections, nor could we be his therapists. Children, like parents, are not made for that, even if we try.

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I cannot bear either the loss of my father, or the sadness that envelops Palestine.

"The land enclosed us," read Mahmoud Darwish, the last time I heard him read, at a poetry reading in Ramallah, just a month before he passed away. It was 2008, only a few weeks after my father had returned for good. My father's house which he longed for and built was closing in on him and I could not bear to watch him wait, like the rest of Palestine, for a mercy that may never come.

I thought the Arab Spring would give him a sense of hope that injustice cannot prevail. But it did not. He simply lay in bed waiting for "another poet," as Darwish said, "to come and write another scenario" for how to continue the struggle and return home.

Leila Farsakh is an associate professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

FORGIVE

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Despite the responsibility that accrues to each person for his or her deeds, Enns does not suggest that we ignore the historical context of those actions. First, because it's important to identify different degrees of responsibility and to distinguish between personal loss and political oppression. In her view, "Mourning a death perpetrated by a Palestinian suicide bomber is no different from mourning a death perpetrated by an Israeli soldier, but the historical circumstances surrounding these deaths are not the same. Personally, all victims are equal in the sense that they are equally reduced to suffering or grieving bodies; politically, historically, they are not, and it is here, on the collective level, that we could argue the greater responsibility belongs to the Israelis, as it does to all those of us whose governments support the Israeli occupation of Palestine."

Second, and more relevant to your question, because the context is crucial in order to distinguish between the period of time in which the individual's freedom of choice was limited or nonexistent, and other periods in his life. In this way victimhood can be treated as a specific moment, "rather than defining it as an absolute identity that both precedes and follows the act of victimization, signifying pure, timeless innocence and thus procuring a great deal of moral capital."

Enns therefore argues that empathy for the victim and moral judgment should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, but rather should be integrated in order to produce a compassionate judgment – both toward the victim-perpetrator and toward his or her victims. In her view, the past suffering experienced by the wrongdoer definitely needs to be a mitigating factor in legal, moral and political decisions; but it must not become blind sanctification of victims which places them beyond moral judgment and critical thought.

In a public discussion, it's important to examine the circumstances of injustice and to judge it accordingly. Private forgiveness is not obliged to consider mitigating circumstances.

Arendt and Enns address the complex cases of victims who were compelled to choose whether to perpetrate wrongs in fear of their lives, and of victims who perpetrated wrongs against those who victimized them. In the case you described, however, the attacker hurt another person not because of a threat to his life nor as an act of resistance. Perhaps he himself suffered sexual abuse in the course of the atrocities of the Holocaust, but that hurt did not force him to hurt his granddaughter's friend years later.

If we maintain that the horrors he endured deprived him of any future capacity to choose between right and wrong, we sentence him (and every other survivor) to an existence that is robbed of moral autonomy and agency, thereby stripping him of his very humanity. It was in this way that Hegel, in his "Philosophy of Right," described punishment as the offender's right, because the punishment respects him as a rational being.

Another important distinction is between criminal law, public discussion and private forgiveness. In the era of social networks, the boundary between these realms seems almost to have disappeared – both from the perspective of those who are convinced that posts on the web should meet standards of criminal law, and from the viewpoint of those who believe that such posts are sufficient to prove the guilt or innocence of a particular person.

In criminal law there is certainly an obligation to weigh all the mitigating circumstances of the accused, including any trauma and hardship that may have contributed to his actions or are relevant to his sentencing. In a public discussion, it's important to examine the historical, social and psychological circumstances of every injustice and to judge it accordingly. However, private forgiveness is not obliged to consider mitigating circumstances. Many victims, especially of sexual assault, become angry at themselves if they find it difficult to forgive their attacker and they see this as a failure – but forgiveness is not a mandatory stage in the process that the victim undergoes. The important question is what is right for him or her and what advances them on the road to healing. The answer to this is different for each person and for each case, and the decision is up to you alone.