

How My World Was Turned Upside Down

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Greetings. I am Debbie Espen, and I thank you all for coming.

Why in the world do I care so much about Palestine and the Palestinians?

The Moment that forever Changed my Life happened on April 3rd, 1978, when I was 25. (No need to do a quick calculation - today is my 59th birthday.)

I was watching the Academy Awards Show on television, and John Travolta had just announced that Vanessa Redgrave had won the Best Supporting Actress award for her role in the film *Julia*, in which she played, alongside Jane Fonda, a Jewish Resistance Activist who was killed by the Nazis.

Travolta handed the Oscar to Miss Redgrave, who then began her thank-you speech. It was a wonderful speech - she said a lot of good stuff! - but smack in the middle of it she said something that both shocked me and made we wonder what the *heck* is going on?!

Here is her speech. I quote Vanessa Redgrave:

My dear colleagues, I thank you very much for this tribute to my work. I think that Jane Fonda and I have done the best work of our lives, and I think this is in part due to our director, Fred Zinneman.

And I also think this is in part because we believed, and we believe, in what we were expressing - two out of millions who gave their lives and were prepared to sacrifice everything in the fight against fascist and racist Nazi Germany.

And I salute you, and I pay tribute to you, and I think you should be very proud that in the last few weeks you've stood firm, and you have refused to be intimidated, by the threats of a small bunch of Zionist hoodlums whose behavior is an insult to the stature of Jews all over the world and their great and heroic record of struggle against fascism and oppression.

And I salute that record, and I salute all of you for having stood firm and dealt a final blow against that period when Nixon and McCarthy launched a worldwide witch-hunt against those who tried to express in their lives and

their work the truth that they believe in. I salute you and I thank you and I pledge to you that I will continue to fight against anti-Semitism and fascism.

(PAUSE) Guess which part shocked me.

I had no idea what she was talking about. I realized that something unusual was going on, and I knew I needed to find out what it was.

That was the opening scene of the Moment that Changed my Life, and more was to follow. At some point that evening I heard a word that I had never heard before, in connection to Vanessa Redgrave. That word was..."Palestinian".

My first reaction was, "What the heck is a Palestinian?" And then, the similarity of the word to the word Palestine hit me and suddenly made me feel Very Uncomfortable. Disturbed even. But that feeling gave me impetus to find out.

I have always been like that. If you saw the movie *The Matrix*, I am the type to take the red pill, willing to learn the uncomfortable truth rather than stay within the comfortable lie.

Let's backtrack a bit.

I was raised Evangelical Fundamentalist Christian. At age ten I was "born again." I knew my Bible through and through - there were a few things in it that bothered me, but I "knew" that Christianity was the Only True Religion and that it had superseded all previous religions, including the Judaism out of which it came.

But though it superseded Judaism, in the Christianity that I had been raised in I had never been exposed to any anti-Semitism.

The very first time I ever saw any anti-Semitism was when I was in the 7th grade and was walking home with my best friend, Kathy Rosen. Some boys across the street began heckling her for being Jewish. Well, I was incensed. I spoke up to defend my friend and her Jewishness, and for my efforts they turned on me, yelling, "Jew-Lover! Jew-Lover!" (Actually I didn't have a problem with that. 😊)

In the Christianity in which I was raised we were taught to honor the Jews. I had read the *Diary of Anne Frank* (and became a Universalist as a result, but that is a different story). I had read the book, and seen the movie *Exodus*. The film *His Land* was shown at my church.

We were taught "a land without a people for a people without a land", and that when the Jews came to Palestine they made the desert bloom.

Well, I found out that both of those statements were Lies. More on that later.

Coming back to 1978. That Momentous Day made me feel very uncomfortable, given my background, but I knew I had to find out.

I am tenacious that way. When I want to find out something, or learn something, I keep at it and keep at it until I feel that I have a handle on it.

But it was hard to find information in 1978. The library was my best friend - it still is - but there was very little on the subject at my local library, and I was not even quite sure what I was looking for. And we didn't have the internet then. But boy, once we did, and I got online, information flooded in.

Eventually I discovered what all the hullabaloo was about Vanessa Redgrave, her comment about a small group of Zionist hoodlums, and that word Palestinian.

Miss Redgrave had made a documentary called *The Palestinian* the same year she did *Julia*. While she was inside the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion getting her Oscar, 75 members and supporters of the Jewish Defense League (the JDL) were picketing outside, and burning her in effigy. That was the "small group of Zionist hoodlums" that she had referred to . Also, the Plaza Theatre in Los Angeles, which was showing *The Palestinian*, was firebombed. And the JDL also had tried to influence Hollywood to blackball her.

There were also 200 or more supporters of Miss Redgrave outside, and the Hollywood producers said that they supported artists' rights to freely express their opinions. And Israeli director Moshe Mizrahi said, "Basically, she's right."

But *what* was she right about? And what was, *is*, a Palestinian?

Well, here we go back to those two Lies I mentioned. The land without a people? ... Nope. Palestine was full of people. People who had been there for generations upon generations, for hundreds of years, some even for thousands. A people with a distinctive culture, customs, architecture, and cuisine (hummus and felafel are Palestinian). They had villages, towns, cities. And not only was it not a desert, it was already in bloom, with

gardens, farms and crops, and orchards - especially the ancient olive trees. What did the incoming European Zionist colonizers do? They destroyed most of those villages, took over the towns and cities, burned the crops and destroyed the orchards... and this is still ongoing today.

I think the first websites that I got information from were Sabeel and Passia. And then through [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) I found, and sent for, the book *Blood Brothers*, by the Palestinian Christian priest Father Elias Chacour, of the Galilee. I read the book, and even had an email exchange with Father Chacour. His book was not just facts and figures, but a personal narrative. He was there in 1948. As a child he and his family and his neighbors were uprooted from their homes by the Israeli Army. They were told they could return in a few days, but when they tried to they were prevented. He saw mass graves of other Palestinian villagers - sort of a hint to stay away. Eventually Jewish European colonists were established in their homes. It is an eye-opening read.

OK, so by now my world had turned completely upside down. I cannot emphasize this enough.

But the more I learned, the more I needed to know. For me the learning process, or rather the RE-learning process, took a very long time, and it was not easy psychologically.

Eventually I came to live in Idaho, and one day, while looking through the Boise Weekly newspaper, an ad stood out to me: A group calling itself The Idaho Committee to End Israeli Apartheid was meeting in Boise. Wow. I knew I had to go. I emailed the leader at the time, a BSU professor, a Jewish woman named Marcy Newman, who has since moved to teach in the city of Nablus in the West Bank. I went to the meeting, and continued to stay involved. It was run for awhile by Fatima Mohammedi, an Iranian-American who then left to sail on the Mavi Marmara, the main ship of the Flotilla to Gaza. She experienced the attack of the Israeli commandos on the ship. When that happened - I was following it live online - I contacted friends and family to pray for her safety. I lost a lifetime friend over this, who told me he hoped she would be thrown into an Israeli prison forever. (Fatima is fine. In fact she spoke here about her first-hand experience, telling what actually happened as opposed to the spin that the media put on it.)

With Fatima moving on, Lama Mohammedi, a Palestinian-American, took over leadership of the group, which was renamed Voices for Palestine. I participated in public vigils and even street theater with this group.

St Michael's in Boise hosted the aforementioned Father Elias Chacour and I went to hear him talk. That made me wonder what churches were involved in Palestinian rights issues. I did some research and was pleased to see that most of the Mainstream Christian churches had issued statements of support and/or were actively involved in the issue. And then I discovered that my own denomination, Unitarian Universalist, also had an associated group, called Unitarian Universalists for Justice in the Middle East, UJME for short. I contacted the national headquarters, and subsequently established a Boise chapter. Our purpose is to disseminate information and hopefully to generate activism.

So, to address the title of this talk, Why DO I care so much? And why should YOU care?

Well, my first reason was an emotional response because of my background. I felt guilty. I had not known the truth. My ignorance and misinformation I felt had contributed to the problem. Being uninformed and/or in denial just perpetuates the situation. I felt I needed to rectify that.

Secondly, it is a Human Rights issue, a matter of Social Justice. People are suffering.

Thirdly, it affects the whole world. Unlike other serious social justice and human rights situations, which are important too, this one affects the entire Middle East, and subsequently the stability and safety of the entire world.

Fourthly, our own country, the U.S., is contributing to the problem. Our tax dollars and our government policy support what is going on over there. We are directly complicit!

And finally, Israel herself. She is a scofflaw and rogue state which ignores and flouts and violates the International Court of Justice, United Nations Resolutions, and the Geneva Conventions. The government of Israel should not be doing that, and should have no special immunity to criticism any more than any other country.

Please note: this has nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with ethnic, cultural, or religious Jews, Jewishness, or being Jewish. This has to do with the policies and actions of the Israeli government.

So, what can we do?

Learn all we can about it.

Tell others.

Speak up - write letters to the paper, write to or speak to our government representatives on every level, and to the Israeli government itself.

Work with organizations who are involved in the issue.

Do I have hope? Yes. But why? Because of the organizations - Religious and Secular, Christian and Jewish, U.S. and Israeli and International and most of all, the Palestinians themselves.

Most Palestinian people are no different than you or I, wanting nothing more than equality, basic human rights, jobs, homes, access to clean water, access to health care, access to education for their children, freedom of movement, freedom from fear and oppression. Most do NOT resort to violence, instead enduring intolerable conditions, just hanging on. They have a word for it - sabr, a quiet dignified perseverance.

I asked Dorgham Abusalim, a student of the College of Idaho, a Palestinian from Gaza, if he still has hope. His answer was yes.

Let me close with the lyrics to a song, (I won't sing it because I would ruin it for you 🎵 It actually has a very haunting melody, which you can listen to on YouTube).

We Will Not Go Down In Gaza Tonight by Michael Heart

A blinding flash of white light
Lit up the sky over Gaza tonight
People running for cover
Not knowing whether they're dead or alive

They came with their tanks and their planes
With ravaging fiery flames
And nothing remains
Just a voice rising up in the smoky haze

We will not go down
In the night, without a fight
You can burn up our mosques and our homes and our schools
But our spirit will never die
We will not go down
In Gaza tonight

Women and children alike
Murdered and massacred night after night
While the so-called leaders of countries afar
Debated on who's wrong or right

But their powerless words were in vain
And the bombs fell down like acid rain
But through the tears and the blood and the pain
You can still hear that voice through the smoky haze

We will not go down
In the night, without a fight
You can burn up our mosques and our homes and our schools
But our spirit will never die
We will not go down
In Gaza tonight

The Palestinian people do not, and will not, give up.

Neither will I.