

Trump, Spinoza, and the Palestinian Refugees

As though we had any ground for doubt heretofore, we can now clearly see — in light of his end to \$350 million in annual humanitarian assistance to five million Palestinian refugees — Donald Trump's cruel and spiteful nature.

It was not enough to stack the so-called peace process against the Palestinians in every possible way, not least by appointing unabashed Israeli partisans as his envoys. It was not enough to give Israel a pass when it murdered noncombatants in Gaza and practiced apartheid in the West Bank. It was not enough to rub the Palestinians' noses in their powerlessness by mocking their dream of East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestine.

No, he also had to deny the hapless and homeless refugees — victims of the Nakba, Israel's systematic ethnic cleansing and expulsion of the Palestinians from their ancestral home in 1948 and again in 1967 — food, medicine, and, for their children, education through the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA. (This is a reversal of Trump's position of last year.) Just before that he cut \$200 million in other Palestinian aid, including to the Israeli-besieged Gaza Strip prison, where half the population is under 18.

Indeed, Trump went still further by seeking to have most refugees declared *nonrefugees* (and therefore ineligible for a right of return to Palestine), defining them out of existence with the wave of a hand. He's attempted, as Geoffrey Aronson put it, to "remove Palestinians from the diplomatic and humanitarian equation." Of course, if he were to accomplish this end, it would relieve Israel's rulers and military, as well as its pre-independence leaders and militias, of culpability for their crimes.

Some blame victims; others — like Trump and his ilk — pretend the victims don't exist. Anyone who attempted something like this with respect to, say, Jews would properly have been denounced by all decent people.

Donald Trump is many things. What he is not is a *mensch*. But we knew that. This is the same guy who seizes children from parents (who lack government papers), seeks to kick people out of the country who were brought here "illegally" many years ago as children, and strives to deport even Americans *with* papers whom his administration eyes with suspicion.

A *mensch* does not act as though millions of people disappear merely because he chooses to ignore them. But Trump acts just that way, just as he acts as though the issue of East Jerusalem could be expected to go away simply by his moving the American embassy to

Jerusalem and decreeing it the unified and eternal capital of the State of the Jewish People (anywhere and everywhere), that is, by taking Jerusalem, as he says, “off the table” — as though *he* had the power to do that. (“So let it be written. So let it be done.”)

Bear in mind that Trump’s move is a spending *redirection*, not a spending *cut*. Moreover, I plead no case for UNRWA. Again, as Aronson writes, “Palestinians are of two minds about the organization. No one can deny the health and educational benefits it provides, but the price paid for being wards of the international community is considerable, indeed for many unbearable.” He paraphrases what a woman in Gaza told him: “UNRWA was an abomination..., responsible for breeding complacency and fatalism among Palestinians and offering an excuse and a means for powers great and small to let the Palestinian problem fester.”

But UNRWA’s many failings cannot be used to justify Trump’s action. He’s not punishing UNRWA’s personnel; he’s punishing *the Palestinians*. He’s not looking for a better way to ease their dire situation. He’s looking to erase them in order to help Israel, although of course the resistance his actions will surely provoke will not be viewed favorably by *all* Israelis. But, yes, I’m implying that some Israelis, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu among many, *will* welcome the resistance because they will use it to justify past and future brutality, oppression, and apartheid.

Axios reports that Netanyahu asked Trump to end U.S. funding of UNRWA. Netanyahu has thus also changed his position from the one that had the backing of Israel’s security apparatus, which favored a gradual reduction in funding but no cuts for Gaza out of security concerns. The thinking until now has been that succor for the refugees would keep them quiescent and take their minds off their right of return, even if that is revised to mean homes in the now-occupied Palestinian territories (the future Palestine) or cash compensation.

Unsurprisingly, *Israel Hayom* reports, “Israeli officials [i.e., politicians] welcomed reports Sunday indicating that U.S. President Donald Trump plans to act to end the Palestinian demand for a right of return and to cut hundreds of millions of dollars in funding for the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, a move they say is in line with Israeli policy.” The publication added, “A diplomatic official dismissed the criticism of a defense official who had been quoted as saying the U.S. decision ‘could set the area, which is already on the verge of a conflict, on fire.’” Jerusalem Affairs Minister Zeev Elkin praised Trump’s move, saying it “finally speaks the truth to the Arab lie that has been marketed all over the world for decades.”

What lie is that? That the Palestinians were terrorized by the Zionist militias and then Israeli army into fleeing their homes in 1948 and 1967? No serious person has doubted this since Israel’s New Historians scoured the government archives in the 1980s and

documented the Nakba, the catastrophe. Long before that, however, scholars had debunked the lie that the Palestinians left voluntarily only when neighboring Arab rulers requested them to do so as a temporary wartime necessity. (But of course, even under that scenario Palestinian property owners would have a right to return to their homes.)

Let's be clear: Trump has no intention of actually addressing the refugee situation, and Israel has no intention of treating any Palestinian justly. The criticism of UNRWA is simply a ruse for once again sticking it to the Palestinians. Why? Because Trump, like the rest of America's ruling elite, favors Israel for geopolitical, domestic political, and cultural and ethnic reasons having nothing to do with justice, and he's miffed that the Palestinians have rejected his "deal of the century," which proposes to bribe them with Saudi economic aid to drop their grievances against Israel and abandon their longing for independence from the self-styled Jewish State. (See my "The Trump-Kushner Delusion on Palestine.")

Trump's die-hard supporters like to say his extreme measures and tweets are merely opening moves in his art of deal-making. So let's go with that: he's holding five million desperate people hostage in order to convince the corrupt Palestinian Authority to take his deal. That's reassuring.

The "peace process" is and long has been a sham, and the United States has never been an "honest broker." An authentic and promising *peace-through-justice* process would begin, quite literally, with an Israeli apology to all the victims who once lived in Palestine. Then all concerned may go about the business of establishing the terms for coexistence.

To bring this back to Trump (and Netanyahu, among others, I venture to say) and to end on a philosophical note, lately I have been reading Benedict Spinoza and some of his modern commentators. The 17th-century Portuguese-Dutch radical liberal rationalist wrote in the *Ethics* that persons for whom reason is not fully in the driver's seat are to some extent passively driven by feelings and are therefore slaves rather than masters: "Human infirmity in moderating and checking the emotions I name bondage: for, when a man is prey to his emotions, he is not his own master, but lies at the mercy of fortune." (Douglas Den Uyl [see reference below] points out that this statement does not fully capture Spinoza's position because in his view, to the extent a person is guided by reason, he has no *self-sabotaging* emotions that need checking; rather, his emotions propel him in a virtuously rewarding direction. Perfection, of course, is never achieved, but only striven for.)

Reason and understanding thus constitute a person's path to freedom:

We shall readily see the difference between the man who is guided only by emotion or belief and the man who is guided by reason. The

former, whether he will or not, performs actions of which he is completely ignorant. The latter does no one's will but his own, and does only what he knows to be of greatest importance in life, which he therefore desires above all. So I call the former a slave and the latter a free man....

Spinoza further observed of the rational person, "His prime endeavor is to conceive things as they are in themselves and to remove obstacles to true knowledge [and hence to freedom, virtue, and "blessedness"], such as hatred, anger, envy, derision, pride, and similar emotions...."

Also, "Therefore he who aims solely from love of freedom to control his emotions and appetites will strive his best to familiarize himself with virtues and their causes and to fill his mind with the joy that arises from the true knowledge of them, while refraining from dwelling on men's faults and abusing mankind and deriving pleasure from a false show of freedom."

Completely ignorant ... hatred ... anger ... envy ... derision ... pride ... dwelling on men's faults ... abusing mankind ... deriving pleasure from a false show of freedom.

Remind you of anyone?

Douglas Den Uyl, in his *God, Man, & Well-Being: Spinoza's Modern Humanism*, writes, "The spiteful, the envious, the small-minded, and the jealous are particularly grievous under Spinoza's philosophy. These negative emotions or patterns of conduct retard both the individual as well as the society around her."

Have we a better description of Donald Trump? Indeed, the man who occupies the White House is the personification of Spinoza's passive, weak, and hence self-enslaved man.