

Nusseibeh on Secular Faith

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In chapter 6 of *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* Sari Nusseibeh points out that an agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis cannot be reached based on *reason* and/or *force*, for they are neither singly nor jointly sufficient to address the legitimate needs and fears of the other party.¹ A missing ingredient to achieving peace between the two parties is *faith*. Nusseibeh cites faith as a “crucial agent in the transformation of protagonists’ self-definitions” (p. 179). This transformation is critical for reaching an agreement between the two people. Nusseibeh argues that faith “rather than force or reason, has been the determining force of political history” (p. 180). This notion of faith is rather interesting in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. We surely cannot deny the role faith plays not only in causing conflicts but also in resolving them. A person may argue that the main force behind the persistence of the Arab-Israeli conflict is itself faith, that is to say, both peoples believe that they are the true inheritors of the land they both live on. Seen from that perspective, how could one argue that faith could also be the solution to this conflict?

In order to answer this question, we need to know what type of faith Nusseibeh is talking about. To Nusseibeh, there are many manifestations of faith; there is the commonly known religious faith, and there is also what he calls “secular faith” (p. 180). What does Nusseibeh mean by “secular faith”? To him, it is a faith in our abilities as individuals and groups to be able to bring about change. It is this type of faith that is missing from the Arab-Israeli puzzle.

Nusseibeh goes on to construct his philosophy of overcoming the insurmountable differences between the Palestinians and the Israelis by arguing that faith constitutes the moral lever by which a person, or a group of persons, can bring about change. There are two essential components to this Archimedean moral lever: (1) will and (2) what Nusseibeh calls “the de-ideologized human being or citizen” (p. 212). Will, or agency, has the power to alter “one’s own identity or another’s; it draws on the notion that human identities are not pre-set or static but are constantly being shaped or formed by conscious acts of will” (p. 211). These two components provide a philosophical/moral solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and rightly so.

¹ Sari Nusseibeh, *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Page references are in parentheses in the text.

The moral dimension of the conflict forces or obliges us to seek a moral solution to it. And one of the most “peaceful” ways of doing that, so as to avoid resorting to violence, is to de-ideologize the conflict. Whether we agree with Nusseibeh’s characterization of the conflict or not, the moral characterization of the conflict cannot be ignored.

If we agree with this moral notion of faith, whether it is secular, philosophical, or religious, it remains to be seen how it can be the lever by which Palestinians and Israelis can come together, knowing that both claim moral superiority for their cause. Nusseibeh’s proposition takes that moral superiority away from both parties and asks them to replace it with moral courage; it is a moral faith that transforms the antagonist to protagonist.

This proposed recipe of change is very appealing but hard to implement by either party. Middle East political history tells us that faith on the part of a leader is not enough to bring about peace—Anwar Sadat’s faith was not enough to transform his people’s view of the Israelis. Nusseibeh may argue that this transformation has to take place on the individual level rather than being advocated (or imposed) by a leader or a head of state. There must be a change in the peoples’ perceptions of each other, a de-ideologizing of the antagonist, or rather, I may add, a de-ideologi-zing of the Other—the “zing” here adds energy to this de-ideologizing process.

But for this type of change to take place, it demands measures of confidence-building by both sides, hence the proposition by Nusseibeh of a one-state solution. This is rather a leap of faith on Nusseibeh’s part! It is a vision he endorsed for many years before it became another viable option to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. By proposing the one-state solution, Nusseibeh leaps over the two main obstacles to achieving a meaningful agreement between the two parties, let alone having peace: refugees and borders. In a two-state solution, these two issues remain irresolvable due to demographic and geographic factors. The one-state proposition eliminates these two obstacles and provides a sense of justice to both parties—in the moral sense at least. A one-state solution addresses the “moral” rights, as opposed to the “legitimate” rights, of both peoples to the same land. This sense of justice is a crucial complement to the article of faith Nusseibeh talks about. The two concepts—faith and justice—are so intertwined that we cannot discuss one without the other. Although Nusseibeh does not make clear the connection between these two terms, his one-state solution provides a fertile ground for both to flourish and eventually bring about a peace between the two peoples. It is, in a sense, the Archimedean lever that could move this intransigent conflict to a peaceful resolution.

