

Education and history for reconciliation in Palestine/Israel. The case of Zochrot

*Educación e historia para la reconciliación
en Palestina/Israel. El caso de Zochrot*

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Abstract

The evolution of the Israeli academy approach to the foundation and essence of the state of Israel has deep political and social ramifications. One of the main impacts is the introduction in the public discourse of previously unknown or unaccepted concepts.

We will try to understand and explain how a small group of people is struggling to promote a different narrative about the creation of the state of Israel into its own society, in order to shape a different social and political future for the people of Palestine/Israel.

So the main focus will be on the activity of an Israeli NGO called Zochrot, whose goal is “to introduce the Palestinian Nakba to the Israeli-Jewish public, to express the Nakba in Hebrew, to enable a place for the Nakba in the language and in the environment”.

There will be an introduction to the history and objectives of the organization, followed by a deeper insight into the tools used to raise awareness and change the perspective from which the vast majority of the Israeli Jewish society looks at the events of 1948, which led to the creation of “their” state and the transformation of the majority of the Palestinian indigenous community into refugees.

The very different activities of Zochrot will offer us the opportunity to observe various theoretical and practical methodologies for education and intervention in the public debate. As a conclusion we will propose a reflection on the relation between academy, education and peace activism, underlining the great potential for conflict transformation that resides in challenging the official views and narratives.

Keywords: History; Education; Memory; Palestine; Israel; Peace; Reconciliation; Activism; Zochrot.

Resumen

La evolución de la postura de la academia israelí a la fundación y el carácter del estado tiene profundas consecuencias políticas y sociales. Uno de los impactos más importantes es la introducción en el discurso público de conceptos anteriormente desconocidos o rechazados. Intentaremos entender y explicar como un pequeño grupo de personas está luchando para promover una narración diferente sobre la creación del estado de Israel hacia su propia sociedad, con el fin de crear una posibilidad de futuro diferente para las comunidades de Palestina/Israel.

Nos centraremos en la actividad de una ONG israelí llamada Zochrot, cuyo objetivo es “introducir la Nakba palestina al público judío-israelí, expresar la Nakba en hebreo, crear un sitio para la Nakba en el lenguaje y en el entorno geográfico”.

Comenzaremos por una introducción a la historia y los objetivos de la organización, para luego analizar más a fondo los instrumentos utilizados para concienciar y cambiar la perspectiva bajo la cual la mayoría de la sociedad judío-israelí mira a los eventos de 1948, que llevaron a la creación de “su propio” estado y a la transformación de la mayoría de la comunidad autóctona palestina en refugiados.

Las muy variadas actividades de Zochrot nos ofrecerán la oportunidad de observar varias metodologías teóricas y prácticas para la educación y la intervención en el debate público. Como conclusión propondremos una reflexión sobre la relación entre academia, educación y activismo para la paz, subrayando el gran potencial para la transformación del conflicto que reside en el desafío a las narraciones oficiales.

Palabras clave: Historia; Educación; Memoria; Palestina; Israel; Paz; Reconciliación; Activismo; Zochrot.

1. Background and objectives

Zochrot¹ is an Israeli NGO based in the city of Tel Aviv, it was founded in early 2002 and its main goal is to bring knowledge of the Palestinian Nakba² to the Israeli Hebrew-speaking public. The majority of the founders were already active in educational projects aimed at a better understanding and coexistence between Palestinian Arabs and Jews.

The word “Nakba” means catastrophe in Arabic language, and it is the term used by the Palestinian community to describe the events of 1948, which led to the expulsion and expropriation of around 700 thousands Palestinian residents of areas that fell under the control of Zionist militias. The human geography of Palestine/Israel deeply changed in a very short period of time, bringing to an abrupt end the social organization and the way of life of the native community.

These traumatic events have been object of a fierce struggle for memory and narration: while the Palestinian refugees commemorated the Nakba and transformed it in their main source of identity and belonging, the Israeli society and academia traditionally neglected and overlooked it, in particular regarding the involvement of Zionist fighters into the mass expulsions. The approach of the Israeli academia gradually changed, and little by little more and more scholars started to study with more attention and scientific rigor the causes of the Palestinian exodus; meanwhile the vast majority of the Israeli Jewish society remained in deep neglect of the suffering their state caused, and is still causing, to the Palestinian refugees in Israel/Palestine and abroad.

Using a trans disciplinary approach we will analyze the work of this Israeli NGO, which tries to raise awareness into the Israeli public of the Nakba and its consequences, tackling this deeply silenced and divisive issue from different methodological angles.

One of the founders, Eitan Bronstein, assumes that there has always been a minority of Israeli Jews criticizing and questioning the official rhetoric of the “1948 War of Independence”³, and raising questions about the responsibilities of the state of Israel towards the Palestinian refugee community.

1. www.zochrot.org/en consulted on the 1st of March 2013. The article is based on a participative research period the researcher spent following Zochrot's Activities, from September to December 2011.

2. Arabic term for catastrophe, used by the Palestinian community to describe the events of 1948, which led to establishment of the state of Israel and the transformation of a large part of the indigenous population into propertyless refugees. See Pappe, Ilan (2006) *The ethnic cleansing of Palestine*, Oxford, Oneworld; Nets-Zehngut, Rafi (2011) “Palestinian Autobiographical Memory Regarding the 1948 Palestinian Exodus”, *Political psychology*, Vol. 32, No. 2, pp. 271-295 and Benvenisti, Maron (2002) *Sacred Landscape, The buried history of the holy land since 1948*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

3. Eitan Bronstein has been interviewed two times by the author, the 14th of November 2010 and 12th of October 2011, both times at the offices of Zochrot, in the city of Tel Aviv

The wave of revisionist scholars who published their works during the 80's⁴ broadened the scope of the debate, enriched it with newly released documents and partially accepted the Palestinian narrative based on the concept of Nakba, opening a freer debate among highly educated residents of the Israeli cities and the scholar community interested in the history of the Middle East around the globe.

So the main aim of Zochrot can be understood as to further broaden the debate about 1948 and the Palestinian refugees' issue among the Israeli society, in order to reach a more wide spectrum of the public opinion. One of the basic assumptions of their work is that the expulsion of the indigenous population is the main root cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Awareness and recognition of the Nakba by the Israeli Jewish audience, which includes accepting historical, social and political responsibility for the condition of the people involved, are considered essential by the members of Zochrot in order to end the conflict between the different communities and to start a process of reconciliation between the peoples of Palestine/Israel.

Zochrot acts in many ways to advance its goals. Of all its actions, the most unique and graphic activity is the organization of tours to Palestinian villages that have been depopulated and/or destroyed. During these tours signs that commemorate the different sites in the destroyed villages are posted. Knowledge of the villages history is provided by refugees and their families and an attempt is made to expose as much of the histories of the ruined village as possible.

Zochrot website states that "It is through these stories that participants can get an idea of what the village actually looked like, and what it was like to live in it. The event is also important in establishing the historical/collective memory of the land. The tour has a different meaning for Palestinians and Jews. For Palestinians this event is a journey back in time to the place where they used to live. For Jews, the tour and the commemoration of sites reveals memories that are hidden from view. The memories revealed often compete with the common, Zionist memory of the place."⁵

Another related activity is to produce a booklet, in Hebrew and Arabic, for each village visited. These booklets reflect Zochrot's process of learning. They feature testimonies by refugees, photographs of the village, and historical background from different sources. The first tours started in 2003, and they have been held quite regularly since then, so already 51 booklets have been published. They now represent a notable archive of information for whoever might be interested in one of the places that have already been visited, and some of them include articles or summaries in English too. As all the others materials produced by Zochrot, they are free to download from their web page⁶.

In one of the next sections we'll focus in one of the visits held by Zochrot to the destroyed village of Iqrit, held in 2010, describing the event from a personal and participative perspective⁷, and reflecting on the significance of this type of event for engaging geography in the public debate between communities in conflict.

"It is Zochrot's ambition to recreate the Nakba in Hebrew — in other words, to enable a space where the Nakba can be spoken of, or written about, in the Hebrew language. For this purpose, a website was created that includes a database of all the Palestinian villages that were destroyed since 1948 and the names of the Israeli localities that were built on their lands. There are also specific maps of the destroyed villages and different details about each of them."⁸ The web page in fact is the main tool for spreading and

4. Commonly known as "Israeli new historians".

5. www.zochrot.org/en "who we are" consulted on the 1st of march 2013

6. The complete archive of localities tour booklets is available at www.zochrot.org "booklets" consulted on the 1st of March 2013

7. The author took part in the tour to this village organized by Zochrot in the 10th of October 2010

archiving information about the activities of the organization, and it represents, at the present day, the most complete and accessible archive of knowledge about the Nakba for Hebrew readers and web users. The English version of the page represents the main source for this chapter and will be analyzed in more extent later in the text.

Another way to reach the Israeli public is by hosting at their offices workshops and lectures with different groups of students, teachers, social activists, and more generally whoever wants to learn about the Nakba. Difficult questions are raised at these encounters that challenge the participants' prior knowledge and values. Also, encounters between Palestinian refugees and the Israelis who now live on their lands have been held. The encounters are meant to offer the possibility for the different narratives of 1948 to be shared and to discuss opportunities for creating a space that would enable the needs of both sides to be met. The premises where Zochrot have its offices are also used as a gallery to host exhibitions of photography, poetry and art, all related to the Nakba and its memories.

The connection between memory, art and academic production is best expressed by Sedek⁹, an high quality magazine published on a yearly basis in Hebrew, where various texts of renowned scholars and thinkers are accompanied by images taken from pieces of local artists. Up to date there have been also two English issues of the magazine, both focused on a deep reflection about the possibility for the Palestinian refugees to return to their hometowns, and all the political, social and geographical implications of such an occurrence; utopian and practical views about the return are proposed and discussed in the texts we will analyze.

Finally we will look at the main didactic tool conceived to help teachers and educators in general who want to teach the events of 1948 in a different way to their pupils, called "How do we say Nakba in Hebrew?". It is a study guide about the Nakba for teachers in the formal and informal Israeli educational systems. The study guide contains 13 units, each of which includes lesson plans and activities tailored to students aged 15 or older. The study guide was researched, written, designed, and assessed by teachers and by Zochrot's staff.

Learning the contents of the study guide engages students in questions about their identities as Israeli Jews, about places that they know well, and about their own collective memory. More advanced concepts examine hegemonic versus silenced histories, what it means to be a refugee and reconciliation, among other topics.

The broad scope of activities is what probably distinguish Zochrot from other associations working in the same fields in Palestine/Israel: Noam Leshem of the Royal Holloway University of London, one of the few scholars who has been writing about Zochrot, affirms that "Although each aspect has been conducted independently by other academic institutions, or activist groups, Zochrot incorporate them into a larger attempt to insert the Palestinian history, or more precisely, the Palestinian Nakba, into the publicly acknowledged history of Israel."¹⁰ Leshem, referring to Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze's political theory¹¹ considers the work of Zochrot as a "minor praxis of memory"¹² which challenges the hegemony of the modern nation state over the control of space, history, landscape and memory.

Einat Maoff, an urban designer and PhD candidate at the environmental psychology program at the City University of New York, includes Zochrot's activities in a number

8. [www.zochrot.org/en/who we are](http://www.zochrot.org/en/who-we-are) consulted the 1st of March 2013

9. Hebrew word for crack

10. Leshem, Noam (2010) "Memory activism" in *Politics of cultural memory*, Cambridge scholars publishing, Newcastle. p. 167

11. Deleuze, Gilles (1986) *Foucault*, Paris, Les editions de minuit.

12. Leshem, Noam (2010) *op.cit.* p.167

of contemporary social science research practices, participatory action research in particular, connected to the development of place based social movements working on the ground to achieve social-environmental justice, connected to the geographical social revolution of the 1970s. She focuses on the term “Counter-mapping” as a “general term for ways of working with maps in cooperation with community members. Researchers and social movements use maps to connect communities, information and ecological applications. [...] The common starting assumption for all these is that the map provides actual proof of spatial presence and can therefore be used by the community in its struggle to retain its lands and its right to them.”¹³

Another academic focusing on the work of Zochrot is Ronit Lentin, an Israeli born sociologist teaching at the Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. In her latest book “Co-memory and Melancholia: Israelis Memorialising the Palestinian Nakba” she reflects on the relations between commemoration and appropriation from the standpoint of a member of the Israeli Jewish society. In the book she devotes one entire chapter to Zochrot¹⁴, criticizing the NGO for memorializing and appropriating the memory of the Nakba without tacking a clear stance on the political ramifications of the struggle for the right of return of the Palestinian refugee community. She questions whether “co-memorizing the Nakba in Hebrew shifts the object of commemoration from the colonized Palestinians to the colonizing Israelis who use this commemorative act to construct their own Israeli Jewish identity”¹⁵. She follows her reflection stating that “the necessary conclusion of commemorating the Nakba must be recognizing the Palestinian right of return”¹⁶ and “calling for the demise of Israel as a Jewish state”¹⁷.

Salman Abu Sitta, founder of the “Palestine Land Society”¹⁸ and author of “Atlas of Palestine, 1948”¹⁹, widely considered the most extensive study on the social geography of contemporary Palestine/Israel, shared with us some thoughts about Zochrot, to which he has been familiar since the start of its activities 10 years ago. He considers them as “pioneers in explaining Al-Nakba to young Israelis”²⁰. He goes on stating that the “mission of Zochrot is important and necessary, but it is an uphill battle against the entrenched system of indoctrination of Israeli institutions.”²¹ He appreciates the innovative educational methods that are used, in particular the visits to destroyed villages: “Zochrot method is practical; to show Israelis the site or the remains of of the destroyed villages and to bring Palestinian people from these villages who say “this was my home”. It is not academically rigorous but it is effective.”²²

At the same time Abu Sitta do not refrain from underlining the limits of Zochrot’s approach, first of all regarding the limited public outreach of its activities in both the communities in conflict. “Zochrot campaign is still very small. It attracts attention because it runs against the mainstream but the the vast majority of Israelis wish to remain in amnesia about Palestine. They see that Zochrot campaign undermines the legality and morality of their existence. Very few Palestinian refugees, outside those displaced within Israel, and specialized NGOs know about Zochrot.”²³

As Ronit Lentin, he also criticizes the soft approach the NGO uses in dealing with the political and practical consequences of the implementation of the rights of the Palestinian refugee community: “Zochrot is still at the threshold of the Nakba’s great domain. I understand that. But for their campaign to have an impact it must start to address the implementation of the Right of Return in concrete steps. Treating the

13. Manoff Einat (2011) “Counter-mapping return”, in *Sedek*, no. 6, Tel Aviv, Zochrot. P. 2.

14. Lentin, Ronit (2010) *Co-memory and melancholia, Israelis memorialising the Palestinian Nakba*, Manchester, Manchester University press, pp. 127-152

15. *ibidem*. p. 129

16. *ibidem*. p. 164

17. *ibidem*. p. 169

18. www.plands.org Consulted on the 1st of March 2013

19. Abu Sitta, Salman (2010) *Atlas of Palestine 1917-1966*, London, Palestine Land Society.

20. Interview with Salman Abu Sitta, 13/01/2013, via email.

21. Interview with Salman Abu Sitta, 13/01/2013, via email.

22. Interview with Salman Abu Sitta, 13/01/2013, via email.

23. Interview with Salman Abu Sitta, 13/01/2013, via email.

Palestinians as new immigrants allowed to their homes under restrictive conditions, as some sympathetic Israelis propose, is not appropriate. There is no escape from the fact that no resolution to this conflict can take root without abolishing the racial laws and the policy of ethnic separation at the core of the Zionist enterprise. It is not possible to advocate the Right of Return and be a Zionist.”²⁴

Before starting a more detailed analysis of some of the most relevant aspects of its activities we will conclude this introduction by showing the explanation of this NGO’s name, as it appears in its own presentation: “Zochrot has an unusual name, which in Hebrew means “remembering” in the feminine form. We are often asked why Zochrot and not the masculine, Zochrim. The masculine form of remembering, as presented in the Zionist discourse, is violent and nationalistic. Zochrot aims to promote another form of remembering, an alternative form that will enable the expression of other memories that are often kept silent. In addition, Zochrot makes an effort to create a space for the memory of women in the Palestinian Nakba. The name “Zochrot” insinuates to all of these.”²⁵

2. Retrieving the stories silenced from the landscape: a visit to Iqrit

The specific dimension of Zochrot’s work which receives a more significant amount of attention due to its openly public nature is the demarcation and the posting of signs, in Arabic, Hebrew and Latin characters, indicating the sites of demolished Palestinian villages and towns within the state of Israel. This kind of public symbolic actions are meant to reaffirm the existence of destroyed Palestinian villages within Israeli landscape and memory through a material and tangible expression: the reappearance of Palestinian name on a signpost, accompanied in many instances by a placard describing the history of the place.

The signposting act is always performed as part of larger event, which brings Israeli Jews and Palestinians together to tour sites where demolished villages, neighborhoods, or towns once stood. During these events, the participants get to know the history of the place through historical accounts and personal testimonies from locals who used to live there. The tours often include ceremonies offering accounts of the life in the location before and during the events that led to their disappearance.

On Saturday, the 2nd of October 2010, I participated in a tour organized by Zochrot to the destroyed village of Iqrit in the upper Galilee, in the northern part of the state of Israel near the border with Lebanon. The recent history of the village is quite remarkable: in 1948, it numbered 490 inhabitants living in some 70 houses, all of them Palestinian Arabs of Catholic religious affiliation. Iqrit’s inhabitants made their living raising crops and herding sheep, goats and cattle.

Iqrit’s own Nakba began on October 31, 1948, when the “Oded” brigade of the newborn Israeli army arrived in the area as part of operation Hiram, undertaken to complete the Israeli occupation of the upper Galilee and deploy forces along Israel’s northern border.²⁶ The army entered the village without encountering any resistance, in full coordination between village representatives, the Israeli military command and members of neighboring kibbutz Ayalon, who accompanied the armed forces as they entered the village. While Israeli officers and troops entered the village, the inhabitants remained in their homes and continued to lead their normal life, fearing no violence or injury.

24. Interview with Salman Abu Sitta, 13/01/2013, via email.

25. www.zochrot.org “who we are” consulted on the 1st of March 2013

26. The main sources for the history of the village are the booklet *Remembering Iqrit* (2010) Tel Aviv, Zochrot, the testimonies of the villagers offered during the tour and Morris, Benny (2004) *The birth of the Palestinian refugee problem revisited*, Cambridge, Cambridge university press.

After about a week, the local military commander contacted village representatives to ask that the inhabitants vacate their houses for a period of two weeks, since the army was to conduct training and other military activities in the area which would threaten the villagers' lives. The commander meanwhile assured the village representatives that the evacuation would be temporary. On November the 8th 1948, the inhabitants of Iqrit were taken by army trucks and cars to the village of al Rameh, about 25 minutes ride to the south. Fifty men and the priest were left behind to watch over the houses and belongings.

When two weeks had expired, following their understanding with the military authorities, the villagers contacted al Rameh's Military Governor and asked for his permission to return to Iqrit, necessary because the Palestinian indigenous population movement inside the state of Israel was subject to military martial law at the time; the military governor refused, and did so repeatedly on several later occasions. After nine months, Iqrit's lands were declared a closed military zone, the army evacuated the villagers who had stayed behind and denied any civilian access to the area.

The villagers then appealed the military ruling at the high court of justice. Their appeal was accepted, and on July 31, 1951, the court made a landmark ruling ordering the defense ministry to allow the villagers of Iqrit to return to their properties. Instead of implementing the ruling the Israeli army demolished all the buildings of the village, except the church and the cemetery, on December 24, 1951. In 1953, the State of Israel seized Iqrit's lands under the Expropriation for Public Purposes Law and the Absentee Property Law which allowed such land takeovers for defense or agricultural development purposes. Under this law, Iqrit's lands were from this moment owned by the state and, from 1960 onwards, were placed under the control of the Land Administration Authority.

In 1966 the Palestinians living inside the state of Israel were relieved from military administration, thus permitting them freedom of movement inside the country. This permitted the villagers of Iqrit to reach their village, where they held protests and started renovating the church and holding prayers there. The village cemetery was also renovated and became the only burial spot for all Iqrit's families, after an arrangement formally approved by Israeli authorities which is in force to this day. The early 1970's saw mounting public pressure on institutions by the villagers and their supporters which culminated in a demonstration in front of the Israeli government buildings in Jerusalem, and a hunger strike in front of the Israeli parliament. Ever since different government officials promised to address the grievances of the villagers but systematically failed to do so, and Iqrit still lays in ruins, apart of its church, where a mass is held the first Saturday of every month, and the cemetery where villagers are buried.

The historical background of the village we took as a case study is very important because it is one of the few cases in which Palestinian refugees have been granted the right to return to their properties by the highest institution of the Israeli legal system. This have permitted them to wage their battle inside the same set of institutions that are responsible for their loss and their kafkian status of "present absentee", and to raise a much higher degree of public awareness and support inside the Israeli society. At the same time this case is instrumental in highlighting the fact that in the Jewish state not

all the citizens are equal in front of the law, one condition that is generally considered the basic pillar of democracy.

Zochrot's tour began immediately following the mass service on the first Saturday in October, in 2010. The tour passed among the many building stones scattered throughout the village grounds. The tour guide, Ma'ruf Ashqar (known as Abu Ni'meh), who was nineteen when he was expelled from his village, and Ni'meh, his son, the chairman of the Iqrit community association, did their best to make the audience understand the significance of the scattered stones.

The group passed the threshing floor, stopped at the remains of the olive press, walked along the path that had been paved through the village in the beginning of the 1940's, then reached the elders' terrace, a row of large boulders on the hilltop where the village elders used to sit during the summer to watch the sunset and chat. After we stood next to the ruins of the village school before concluding the tour at the church, where Abu Ni'meh unveiled a model of the village as it had looked the day the Israeli army put the villagers on buses and exiled them to the village of al-Rameh, comprising 80 small, numbered cubes, representing each building accompanied by a list of 76 names of the owners of the homes.

Members of Zochrot and villagers erected signs identifying sites in the village which we passed on the tour, and distributed the booklet "Remembering Iqrit," prepared for this occasion. More than 120 people participated in the tour, most of them refugees from the village. This was mainly possible because almost all the villagers became internally displaced refugees after 1948. In 1966 they were accorded Israeli citizenship, but for the Israeli legal system they remain considered "present absentees"²⁷, meaning they are not allowed to reclaim their property also if they can physically reach it.

The tour was organized jointly by Zochrot and the Iqrit community association, which was established in 2009 in order to represent and promote the individual and collective rights of the villagers and their descendants, to maintain their sense of community and to preserve the existing structures. Their main vision for the future is "to rebuild Iqrit as a home for the community and their descendants, where they can live their lives as equal citizens in the country."²⁸

A lot of the villagers stressed the importance of the church and cemetery to keep the connection with the village while not being allowed to live there. The church is the focal point for prayers and meetings held on a monthly basis and is used to baptize the newborn and to celebrate marriages of descendants of the villagers. The few young members of the village community who participated in the tour expressed the desire to live in the village as soon as possible, thus demonstrating that the efforts to keep the community in touch with the village have produced some fruit.

The cemetery too represent a focal point of discussion and pride of the refugees, in fact it is maintained in very good conditions. For most of them it represents the connection with the previous generations and it also give a tangible meaning to their struggle to return to the village: Iqrit's people joke they're permitted to return only after they're dead, but that's better than nothing. The house of the dead has become an optimistic symbol, preserving the refugees' connection to their homeland.

27. For the procedures of expropriation put in place by Israeli institutions see: Pflingst, Annie (2010) *Erasure, enclosure, excision, framing Palestinian return*; PhD thesis, Sidney, University of technology, and Yiftachel, Oren (2010) "Ethnocracy, the politics of Judaizing Israel/Palestine", in *Across the wall*, London, I.B. Tauris.

28. www.iqrit.org consulted on the 1st of march 2013

The impact of this tours and visits can be understood and analyzed on three different levels: the first one lays in the realm of public discourse: this type of practice poses a serious challenge on the state's monopoly to organize and regulate landscape through symbols and maps²⁹. On this matter Leshem underlines that “the official public sign, in its various forms, holds great significance in the construction of the Israeli hegemonic collective memory. Signposting is a practical tool used to write on, and about, the landscape. As a discursive practice, the signs acts to construct the body of knowledge that is accessible to the inhabitants of a specific landscape, controls, and measures the exposure to it, and blocks out unwanted or competitive knowledge. The state issues the authoritative apparatuses with the right to plant signs as a means of establishing presence and control over a given space and its inhabitants.”³⁰

The signs posted by Zochrot are meant to reaffirm the silenced Palestinian history of the visited locality, in order to break the idea of continuous and homogeneous Hebrew-Jewish space. Undermining the spatial basis of the Zionist national narrative is seen as a way to open up new possibilities for more equitable solutions for sharing the disputed land of Palestine/Israel. In fact another level on which this visits affect the mainstream Israeli Jewish mindset is the individual relation with the landscape. Across the state of Israel ruined Palestinian villages, towns and urban buildings are a common sight. At the same time they are somehow removed not only from the official signs, but also from the eyes and the interest of the passerby. The trilingual signs are conceived to transform this perception, to raise doubts and questions, and to change the relation of the Israeli citizen to landscapes who may have been considered familiar to the observer, but were never really completely accepted until the history of the “abandoned or ruined villages” and the causes of their destruction are investigated. The study curriculum that we will analyze further goes deeply onto questioning the relation between the Israeli observer and the silenced Palestinian landscape.

The “removal” of the destroyed villages from the Israeli official and personal sight is accompanied by the removal, physically and psychologically speaking, of the people who used to live in such places. The Israeli public opinion deals with the previous inhabitants, expelled and prevented from claiming back their properties, by generally dubbing them as “refugee problem”, “infiltrators” or “demographic threat” depending on the political mood of the moment. They are never considered as individuals, families and communities who endured and are still enduring a huge amount of suffering. The visits are a valuable occasion to turn this perception and give Israeli Jews the opportunity to meet some of these people and their descendants, to speak with them, sharing their stories about the village, and to listen to and try to understand their desires, ideas and projects for the future. The idea of transforming the formless mass of refugees into faces with a personal story and different desires is one of the main objectives of the association website, which can reach a far wider public than the tours and workshops.

3. A virtual place for the Palestinian Nakba in Hebrew

The potential of the world wide web for spreading information is well known. In fact it appears that Zochrot is putting a lot of attention and resources in maintaining its own space in the web. It represents the most visible face of the organization for a much wider public than the ones who join their activities in Tel Aviv and elsewhere in Palestine/Israel. The site represents in fact the main tool for promoting the activities of the

29. Anderson, Benedict (1991) *Immagined Communities*, London, Verso. And Farinelli, Franco (2009) *I segni del mondo*; Torino, Einaudi.

30. Leshem, Noam (2010) op.cit. p.169



group and for entering the public debate, at home and abroad, so the page is completely trilingual: the vast majority of the contents are accessible in Hebrew, Arabic and English. The contents are very frequently renovated and a trilingual newsletter service is available for who want to be kept updated on the the work of Zochrot; the weekly frequency of the newsletter proves the huge and constant amount of activities in which the group is engaged. During 2012 the web page received 84 thousand visits, mainly from the state of Israel.³¹

The importance given to the power of image is witnessed by the main page, where the user is met by a large slideshow³² wich shows a sequence ot four photos: “young men on a hike, Haifa 1945”, “Palestinian employees at the Customs Department, Haifa”, “A father, refugee from al-Kafrayn, with his children, on a tour of al-Kafrayn” and “A family from Lebanon, refugees from Sabalan, on a visit to Sabalan in the 80’s”; the same text is imposed over all the images shown: “Where are you from?”. The question, asked in the three languages, is one to which everybody is very familiar with, but that in the context created by the photos assumes a deeper meaning. We can observe this technique throughout all the activities of the group we took into consideration: using simple and familiar concepts and images as a soft way to raise doubts and questions that can affect the perception of identity and the sense of belonging of the reader/watcher, in particular the Jewish Israeli one.

The main purpose of the website is to include a database of all the Palestinian villages that were destroyed since 1948 and the names of the Israeli localities that were built on their lands. There are also specific maps of the destroyed villages and different details about each of them. “The importance of this site is that it places the Palestinian Nakba in the virtual space of Hebrew speakers who surf the web”³³ As this quote from the web page presentation underlines, this is the first attempt to create an on line archive of the Palestinian Nakba in Hebrew language.³⁴

The archive is enriched with videos of testimonies of refugees from a considerable number of localities, with an expanding part dedicated to Zionist fighters who participated in various ways in the military actions that leded to the expulsions. The impact of such kind of direct testimonies cannot be underestimated: the majority of the watchers will find far more easy to develop some kind of empathy towards the victims if exposed to a video showing the face and the gestures of the speaker.

For the Israeli Jewish public opinion this aspect is very relevant. As we stressed before the exposure to this kind of interview can modify the perception of the Palestinian refugees from a politically charged political concept related to national security to a personal story of suffering and dispossession, in some way familiar to the audience but silenced by a deep social taboo. In this sense the impact of testimonies by Zionist fighters who participated in the expulsions can have even more far reaching consequences: an Israeli Jew speaking about the atrocities he committed or witnessed during the so called “War of Independence” of 1948, can raise very deep doubts and questions about the way the foundational moments of the state of Israel are been understood by its society. The archive material is completed by a broad array of articles and comments by the members an collaborators of the group, a press review of texts about the activities of the association, a collection of maps and photographs and a section devoted to *Sedek*, a magazine published by the group on a yearly basis.

31. Google Analytics 2012 overview xxx.zochrot.org consulted on the 1st of March 2013

32. Zochrot.org/en consulted on the 1st of March 2013

33. www.zochrot.org/en “who we are” consulted on the 1st of March 2013

34. www.palestineremembered.com consulted on the 1st of March 2013. It is the most complete on line archive about the same topic for English and Arabic readers. For English readers see also the wikipedia page: list of Arab towns and villages depopulated during the 1948 Palestinian exodus.



4. Sedek, imagining return

Sedek, A Journal on the Ongoing Nakba, is published in Hebrew on a yearly basis since 2007. The title of the magazine stresses the importance in understanding the Palestinian Nakba as an ongoing process of dispossession suffered by the Palestinian indigenous community since the establishment of the state of Israel, and not as a tragic episode of history related only to the military hostilities of 1948.

After three years of publication a trilingual issue was published in 2010, in collaboration with BADIL, the Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, an independent NGO “mandated to defend and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees and internally displaced persons”³⁵. This issue includes a selection of essays appeared in the Hebrew magazines which deal with practices, visions and possibilities for the return of Palestinian refugees. The authors are clear in their purpose and vision on many critical points, first of all they chose not to discuss or argue for the right of return, they simply state their belief that the right is justified and proceed to describe the possible political, geographical, social and economical manner of its implementation, in their word they “propose not to talk about the right, but about the return”³⁶

The first essay is a comprehensive discussion about how the right of return can be implemented in stages while balancing individual and collective rights. Norma Musih and Eitan Bronstein, the authors of this essay called “Thinking practically about the return of the Palestinian refugees”³⁷, draw upon Salman Abu Sita’s geographical studies to argue that there is enough room inside the state of Israel to resettle the refugees, and that a great majority of them can recover their properties without causing conflict with Jewish immigrants that settled the country after 1948.³⁸

In order not to alienate the refugees community from the discussion they accept the return as both a collective and individual right. The latter is of foremost importance because it implies that no entity can negotiate away the claim of individuals to their lost properties. This is a focal point that has always been sidelined in the international forums of debate and has lead to the current stalemate situation. The authors also recognize that the exercise of the right of return would result in the Jewish citizens of the state of Israel becoming a demographic minority, dramatically shifting the actual balance of power in the country. They also recognize that a very thin minority of the Israeli Jews at the moment seems ready to accept such a political and social change. Because of this they assume that a social and political change inside the state of Israel and its society must precede the return of the refugees, underlining that, to avoid the possibility of a civil war, every decision about the absorption of the refugees must be made with the consent of the majority of the receiving population.

Another point stressed, in order to reassure the fears that block such kind of discussion, is the principle that nobody will be forced to leave his home or properties in the eventual process of return. They enter in great detail in practical thinking about various aspects of the process of return of the refugees, opening the way for following essays that explore more specific aspects of the return. Various engaged Israeli scholars tackle different aspects of the issue from different perspectives.

In 2011 another trilingual issue has been published, following the ongoing collaboration between Zochrot and BADIL in organizing workshops, seminars and encounters where

35. www.badil.org consulted on the 1st of March 2013.

36. Musih, Norma and Bronstein, Eitan (2010) “Thinking practically about the return of the Palestinian refugees”, in *Sedek*, special translated issue, Tel Aviv, Zochrot

37. *ibidem*

38. Abu Sitta, Salman (2010), *Atlas of Palestine 1917-1966*, London, Palestine Land Society. www.plands.org consulted on the 1st of March 2013

Palestinian refugees and Israelis have been discussing and working on different topics which culminated in an exhibition titled “Towards Return of Palestinian refugees”, held at Zochrot’s office in Tel Aviv in the month of October 2011. The magazine incorporate the material of the exposition offering a visual and textual platform meant to stimulate thinking towards the return of the refugees, from a political, visionary and planning-wise point of view. In a presentation of the magazine the publishers stressed that “the ideas published in this issue of *Sedek* were raised and developed in workshops, and they are still in the working stage. Within the workshop framework, participants also planned and designed the materials included here. Thus, the content of this issue should be approached as raw material and a starting point for the continuing development of planning toward the return of the refugees.”³⁹

In the first essay Einat Manoff present the definition of “counter mapping”, which has already been quoted above to define the work of the group, and which is very fruitful in connecting the work of the academia with grassroots community based processes in challenging and reshaping the official knowledge and control of the landscape. The relevance of this kind of approach is particularly evident when applied to the Palestinian refugees issue: a matter that is very difficult to approach when tackling it from a national political point of view can become more tractable and less polarizing when looked from the perspective of the daily life of the people involved, from both sides.

This bottom-to-top thinking can lead to “a discourse focused on a space delimited by borders at the local level rather than by the borders of a sovereign state, allows us to discuss the practical aspects of creating common space based on the daily life of the individual in the community and on housing, employment and movement through territory. All these can serve as the basis for wider understanding and a greater range of activities.”⁴⁰

The second essay presents the project “Exile and return to Miska” developed by Ahmad Barclay in collaboration with DAAR “Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency”⁴¹, an art and architecture collective based in Beit Sahour, a Palestinian town located east of the West Bank city of Bethlehem. DAAR’s work combines discourse, spatial intervention, education, collective learning, public meetings and legal studies. Ahmad’s narrative of “re-emergence” imagines a return taking place in four stages: first, symbolic interventions on the site of the destroyed town, located near the town of Tira, inside the state of Israel; second, a token return to the Miska, by Palestinians already living inside the state of Israel; third, an actual return by a handful of other families, who begin to recreate the urban fabric; fourth, a solidification of the urban fabric as the remaining families choose to return or to remain absent.

The project, presented with texts, maps and photo-shopped images of a possible future outlook of the town, reflects about the challenge posed by reimagining a town which has been depopulated and destroyed, and the uncertainty facing the community of people who will chose whether to return or not: “a phased return of refugees creates an urbanism composed of ‘certain’ and ‘uncertain’ space. An architecture of presence juxtaposed with the landscape of erasure continues to mark the families whose futures are undecided or who are still unable to return”⁴². Another fundamental issue raised is the fact that not all the refugees will decide to return if permitted to chose between going back their hometown or economic compensation: “the potential choice of some

39. www.zochrot.org/en/content/editorial-introduction-and-invitation consulted on the 1st of March 2013

40. Manoff Einat (2011) op.cit.

41. www.decolonizing.ps consulted on the 1st of March 2013

42. Barclay Ahmad (2011) “Exile and return to Miska” in *Sedek*, 6, Tel Aviv, Zochrot, p. 8.

families to remain in absence introduces permanent voids within the urban fabric. These become public spaces with an architecture composed of a dialogue between the layers of memory, erasure and presence.”⁴³

This aspect of the discussion is of utmost importance because it is another step in deconstructing the stereotypical image of the refugees of a mass of people with the same desire to go back to their hometowns by any mean possible. Retaking in consideration their desires and hopes for the future can change this picture, creating a different climate for the debate and probably diminishing the fears of the Israeli Jews towards the refugee community.

This same issue is raised in another article by DAAR collective, “Al fenieq in Miska”⁴⁴ which offers the possibility for the return of Palestinian refugees to Miska, and begins by opening a space at the center of the destroyed village for creative action and culture. The project is titled al Fenieq, the mythological phoenix that rises over and over again from its ashes, and it is also the name of a cultural community center in the Dheisheh refugee camp, located in the West Bank city of Bethlehem, where most of the refugees from Miska actually live. The image of Al Fenieq is replicated in the framework of the projected refugee return from Dheisheh to Miska, “a return that will be built not on the denial of the refugee camp, but on its inclusion.”⁴⁵ The text offers an excerpt of a dialogue between residents of the refugee camp, in which the topic of return is discussed, revealing a surprising relation to the places: “But I don’t really want to leave Dheisheh! To whom shall we leave the camp? Is there no way to have both, our village “our right”, and the camp “our life”?”⁴⁶

The authors of the text aim to create a “stereoscopic vision”⁴⁷ to explore the link between the two places, the extraterritorial space of the refugee camp and the village of origin, out of the reach of its people. The reflection leads to understand the analogies between the places that create a dual sense of belonging in their inhabitants: “Both the demolished villages and the refugee camps are extraterritorial spaces, not fully integrated into the territories that surround them. The former is legally defined as absentee property and the latter as a United Nations administered area, a sphere of action carved out of state sovereignty. Refugee life is suspended between these two ungrounded sites. Always double.”⁴⁸

In another article included in the magazine, Yehouda Shenhav further investigates the theoretical implications of considering the return of the refugees not only as a political matter, but also as a question of relation between human memory, space and time. He proposes the concept of “chronotope of the return”. He explains that “the term “chronotope” is taken from the theory of relativity, wich defines time as the fourth dimension of space. Bakhtin adopted the concept to analyze temporal and spatial temporary loops: “In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole.”⁴⁹

In his view the continuing condition of the Palestinian Nakba requires a “heterochronic conception of time, one according to which the present is included in the past and the past is included in the present”⁵⁰. As we saw before the life of the refugee community is not only suspended in time, but also in different places detached from their environment, so we are also required to conceptualize “the heterotopic space, in which the

43. Ibidem, p. 8

44. DAAR, (2011) “Al fenieq in Miska”, in *Sedek*,6, Tel Aviv, Zochrot.

45. ibidem

46. ibidem

47. ibidem

48. ibidem

49. Shenhav, Yehouda (2011) “the chronotope of the refugee return” in *Sedek*,6, Tel Aviv, Zochrot, p. 4

50. ibidem

Nakba and the return are multi-spatial events comprised of Palestinian space prior to 1948, its memories, the contemporary Israeli space, and the refugee camps⁵¹.

This complex and multiple understanding of the condition of the refugees issues is very useful to avoid falling into dogmatic formulations that are so common in the ongoing debate between communities torn by the decades-long conflict over sovereignty, memory and land. The author criticizes both mainstream national narratives of the events occurred in 1948, assuming that both are based in the same theological mindset: “The dream of return is based on the narrative “from destruction to redemption”, a narrative that conceptualize the past as a time of destruction (the nakba) and the future as a time of redemption (the return). Zionist nationalism likewise conceptualizes the relationship between the past and the future in terms of destruction (destruction of the Temple, Diaspora, Holocaust) and redemption (the establishment of the state of Israel).”⁵²

He assumes that in any future agreement the returning refugees will have to situate their rights in the present, accepting the geography created by the state of Israel and the presence of the Israeli Jews, who will in exchange relinquish their privileges obtained and maintained through violence and institutional discrimination. This conclusion is also shared by Akhram Salhab, the communications officer at BADIL and editor of *al-Majdal*, BADIL’s english language quarterly magazine. In the article concluding the magazine he explains that the main focus of BADIL and Zochrot’s joint activities is to imagine and plan how Palestinian refugees can go back home and how this is to be done fairly, efficiently and in a manner that also protects the rights of the receiving community.

Beside the individual quality of the articles presented, Sedek is quite an outstanding example of free and liberal debate about a very sensible and topic in Israeli contemporary society, which is experimenting in the latest period a steady drive towards a more authoritarian and repressive public mood, both in a political and social point of view. It also represents a small victory for those who believe in cooperation between people from the different communities in Palestine/Israel, demonstrating that an open atmosphere for debate can bring forward creative ideas that can help imagining solutions to the stalled conflict.

The main issue that remains open is how is it possible to transmit different narratives and ideas to a polarized public, in order to modify and humanize the perception of the refugee community in the eyes of the contemporary Israeli Jewish society. The main tool that Zochrot has to offer for this purpose is a complete didactic curriculum created to explain the Palestinian Nakba to Israeli students.

5. How do we say Nakba in Hebrew?

The study guide is intended for use in the formal and informal educational systems, aimed at pupils and students aged 15 and older in Israeli schools. The Study Guide addresses the Palestinian Nakba by raising questions about identity, familiar places, the creation of collective memory and about the relationship between the history that dominates and the histories which are suppressed⁵³.

51. ibidem

52. ibidem

53. In recent years, the academic world has become suspicious of the term “History.” Critics argue that “History” is necessarily one-sided, that it fails to present a comprehensive picture and reflects only the view of society’s hegemonic forces which preserved those accounts which were consistent with their own point of view. In fact, “The History” is accompanied by additional narratives and voices which have usually been silenced. For us, the term “histories” includes those silenced voices.

Since the Palestinian Nakba isn't part of the standard Israeli school curriculum, teachers who wish to teach it in school often find themselves lacking the necessary tools or knowledge required to present the topic in a way that encourages a critical examination of the 1948 war and its consequences. The need to provide accessible materials, appropriate and understandable for the public, was the principal motivation for creating this study guide. The teachers interested are offered courses, seminars, and workshops in order to experience the study guide's critical and pedagogical approach, overview the learning process and methods of applying the guide in different educational settings. Zochrot also offers ongoing support for those using the study guide, to help address challenges that arise during the classes, and develop additional material.

Aiming at such audience the study guide was crafted specifically for Hebrew readers and speakers, and no translation was programmed. Only after various requests from Jewish American organizations and schools some members of Zochrot decided to translate the curriculum to English. The text we use for our analysis is a work draft who is now being reviewed by the Institute of Human Rights at Columbia University, and will probably look very different when it will be published and offered to the wider English reading public, because it will be adapted to the pedagogical needs of the North American public, which of course experiences a very different relation with the geography and history of Palestine/Israel. For the purpose of our research the fact that this working draft is a literal translation of the Hebrew text is a great opportunity to analyze the study guide as it was originally meant for the Israeli Jewish public.

The creation of "How do we say Nakba in Hebrew" stems from the acknowledgement that the Nakba is a foundational event in the history of the communities involved in the conflict, one which continues to influence their lives today, but it is also an event which has been silenced, one which contemporary Israeli society is barely aware of: physical remains continue to be destroyed, the names of Palestinian localities are missing from the map and from the landscape, and even the memory of the culture and the way of life that was present in the landscape before 1948 has almost no echo in Israeli public discourse.

The main challenge for the people involved in this educational project has been dealing with the gap between what is known about 1948 and what is not known: "How can we tell a story which is so different from the one we are familiar with, and sometimes even contradicts it? Can we bridge the gap between the Israeli reality, which reaffirms the story of the war of independence, and the other story of 1948?"⁵⁴ This gap will eventually raise fears and uncertainty in the audience, sometimes leading to a total rejection or even violent responses to what is seen as an existential threat to the very same idea of "Jewish state". The soft and gradual approach is designed to minimize this occurrences, and to let the student create and develop his own path to doubt and awareness.

In fact the study guide does not pretend to address the entire range of events that occurred during 1948, but hopes to raise questions and shed a different light on them, encouraging students to investigate them further and make their own discoveries. The main stated goal is in fact is "to begin the process of learning and teaching the story of the Nakba by developing appropriate tools for dealing with it"⁵⁵. This tools will be instrumental in reviving silenced aspects of Israeli history and identity. Such learning

54. *How do we say Nakba in Hebrew?*, introduction, unpublished. An interesting proposal for bridging the gap between the narratives in conflict is offered by historians Jamil Hillal and Ilan Pappé through the concept of "Bridging Narratives". See Pappé, Ilan and Hillal, Jamil (2010) *PALISAD, Palestinian and Israeli academics in dialogue*, in *Across the wall*, London, I.B. Tauris.

55. *How do we say Nakba in Hebrew?*, introduction, unpublished.

is considered a necessary precondition for the development of new relations between the communities, based on respect, recognition and accepting responsibility.

The study guide is grounded in the principles of critical pedagogy. It seeks to provide students with tools for interpreting the reality in which they live, coping with it emotionally and intellectually, and exercising critical thought. The Palestinian disaster as presented in the study guide is not just one story, it involves many stories. That's why all along the lessons a new, authorized and "true" version is never provided, but instead a complex of stories which, like the hegemonic account, require examination.

Methodologically, the guide has a very broad approach to different learning materials, using primary and secondary historical sources, films, photographs, artwork and computer presentations, as well as original materials especially prepared by the staff of Zochrot. The curriculum is composed by 13 didactic units, which combine learning about the events and confronting it experientially with theoretical approaches to the topic. The units are independent, so the study guide can be employed in two ways, allowing users a multiplicity of approaches to the subject. The first way is in a chronological-linear manner, beginning with unit 1 and continuing through to unit 13. The first units focus on the private and the personal, and then move on to more general issues; from the past, through the immediate present and into the future; from traces of the Nakba in the pupil's daily experience and familiar surroundings to a more general understanding of its historical, contemporary, social, cultural aspects.

The second way is a modular manner, by choosing a set of activities focusing on a particular topic or relevant to a particular discipline. The modular framework is based on key words that are identified at the beginning of each unit, which can be used in reordering the units and creating alternative arrangements. The key words also allude to possible topics: units identified by the key word "Place," for example, may be appropriate to a geography or history class; the key word "Art" is relevant to an art, literature or film class. Units identified as "Education," "Collective memory" or "The future" may be relevant to a civic education or class discussion; the key word "Histories" may be relevant to a history class.

Every unit specifies the goals of the activity on which it focuses, includes supplementary material and details the activity. Some of the units include suggestions for follow-up activities and discussions. In addition, each unit is accompanied by its theoretical background and its educational rationale, as well as suggestions for further reading about the particular topic. The theoretical background at the end of each unit presents the teacher with the approach used in preparing it, as well as providing an opportunity for dialogue between the users of the study guide and its authors. The educational rationale draws upon the critical pedagogical approach, and presents the educational principles upon which the activity is based; it specifies how the activity should help the pupils decode reality and deal with it emotionally, as well as how it is meant to encourage critical thinking.

Preparing this Study Guide took around three years, and it is the result of the work done by different groups of teachers, working under the auspices of Zochrot. The teachers studied and critically examined the events and considered how best to introduce the Nakba in the schools while addressing educational issues relevant to Israeli pupils. While highlighting the broad scope of activities of Zochrot and the creative methodologies

used to tackle difficult issues it must be recognized that until now the various activities proposed have not achieved the objective of reaching most of the Israeli society, that to this day remains firmly attached to the official national narrative describing the events of 1948 as the “War of Independence”, and which do not accept or tolerate the debate about topics that may endanger or challenge the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. At the same time the term Nakba has entered the public arena of debate⁵⁶, sparking reactions from the public institutions and from the society in general. It’s difficult to state how much is Zochrot’s work responsible for spreading in the use of this term in the Israeli Jewish public, but it can surely be assumed that the activities of the group are one of the causes of this process.

In assessing the limits of the activity of the Zochrot it is necessary to underline that in the context of contemporary Israeli society whoever tries to challenge the official narrative about 1948 is submitted to a considerable social and institutional pressure. This is particularly true for educators working in the public school system, which must withstand fierce opposition from their institutions, colleagues and from the families of their students if they decide to use, also in a very limited scope, the materials offered in the study curriculum we took as a case study.

Nonetheless it must be noted that the group is anyway expanding its activities, not discouraged by the grim short term social and political perspectives. For its same own nature, education activism must be understood as a long time based effort. In this sense it is probably worth underlining as the most outstanding result the fact that the group has managed to create a strategic relation with BADIL, a grassroots organization representing a part of the Palestinian refugee community. The same existence of such a kind of alliance is a very significant achievement and if maintained in the future it can represent an opening for further opportunities of dialogue, understanding and the creation of political and practical solutions to the plight of the Palestinian refugee community.

56. Nets-Zehngut, Rafi (2011), “Origins of the Palestinian refugee problem: changes in the historical memory of Israeli Jews 1949-2004” in *Journal of peace research*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 235-248.

57. For the latest developments in the field of peace research about the relation between history, conflict transformation, and peace education see Joung, Nigel (editor) (2010) *The Oxford international encyclopedia of peace*, Oxford, Oxford University Press; Jimenez Arenas, Juan Manuel y Muñoz, Francisco (editors) (2012) *La paz, partera de la historia*, Granada, Editorial Universidad de Granada; Abellan Jesus and others (2012) *La praxis de la paz y los derechos humanos*, Granada, Editorial Universidad de Granada.

58. Interview with Ilan Pappé, 13/12/2012, at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter.

59. Interview with Ilan Pappé, 13/12/2012, at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter.

60. *How do we say Nakba in Hebrew?*, introduction, unpublished.

6. Academy, education and peace activism

The relation between activism for peace and reconciliation, academic research and education in the context of the ongoing conflict in Palestine/Israel assumes a very deep and interconnected character.⁵⁷ The presence of a situation which stems from unresolved historical issues and is constantly mixing with the daily life and suffering of the communities make it almost impossible to distance the perspective of the historical researcher from the involvement, in higher or lesser degree, in the present situation.

With a striking simplicity and clearness Ilan Pappé, renowned representative of the Israeli “new history”, states that “being honest and transparent about your position in the ongoing conflict is the only way to make your own research really relevant”⁵⁸. He assumes clearly that we are dealing with a colonial conflict, and that he is a member of the colonizing society who decided to struggle for the rights of the indigenous population. In the effort to “decolonize history”⁵⁹ one of the main effort is to overcome the dichotomous separation between the oppressor and the oppressed narrative, in order to create shared spaces of debate and discourse in which everybody involved can feel included. One of the most recurrent statement in Zochrot’s texts in fact is: “The Nakba is the Palestinian catastrophe, but also our story, of Jewish Israelis.”⁶⁰

The effort to create an inclusive narrative is very well represented by an exhibition presented in October 2012 in Tel Aviv by movie director Eyal Sivan, professor Ilan Pappé and the staff of Zochrot, called “Towards a Common Archive”. It consisted of over 100 filmed testimonies by Israeli veterans who fought with various Zionist militias during 1948. The exhibit serves as a pilot for a much larger project, which seeks to build an interactive website bringing together the testimonies of Palestinian refugees and Zionist fighters about the Nakba.

The project has been inspired by the experience of the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission”⁶¹ of post-apartheid South Africa, where victimizers and victims shared their memories, explanations and feelings in order to create a possibility of reconciliation between the embattled communities. In absence of any kind of public policy willing to tackle the same issues in Palestine/Israel at this stage, this initiative shows how academic research and peace activism have the potential to trigger small scale processes that may pave the way for a more substantial drive for reconciliation.

From a methodological point of view is interesting to note how the term “common” is charged with a double meaning: first, following the line traced by US historian Howard Zinn, author of “A people’s history of the United States”⁶², it stands for the history of the common people, opposed to the elitist history concerned only about the ruling groups involved in the decision making process. The second meaning is common as a joint, shared history. All the people involved in this project have been very keen in underlining that for any future possibility of reconciliation in Palestine/Israel it is fundamental to overcome the notion of two narratives, the Israeli and the Palestinian one, seen as irreconcilable but deemed to cohabit somehow. Eyal Sivan states that the aim of “Towards a Common Archive” is exactly the opposite: “There is the Zionist narrative and there is the Palestinian narrative as if those two narratives can cohabit. In order to get out of the conflict - conflict of memory, conflict over history - the only way is, in fact, to come and find a joint narration. [...] The perpetrators’ testimonies will be joined by the Palestinian testimonies and out of that we can come to a narrative that is based on a recognized common history.”⁶³ Ilan Pappé further stresses that “creating a common narrative, a history in which everybody concerned can feel included, is an important part in the process of reconciliation and peacemaking, not only in the specific case we are dealing with, but in every kind of conflict.”⁶⁴

At the same time it should be acknowledged that this kind of transformation needs a long term effort, and it always encounters a great amount of resistance from the interested societies, because it affects very deep feelings and entrenched values, which people are very attached to. This sentence from Zochrot’s study guide represents well the difficulties and the possibilities of such a path of reconciliation from the point of view of Jewish Israeli society: “learning about the Nakba challenges and fractures the basic assumptions on which we were raised. But it also has the potential to create a future of reconciliation.”⁶⁵

61. See Rothberg, Robert and Thompson, Dennis (directors) (2000) *Truth V. Justice, the morality of truth commissions*, Princeton, Princeton University Press; and Battle, Michael and Tutu Desmond (1997) *Reconciliation, the ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu*, the Pilgrim Press, Cleveland.

62. Zinn, Howard (2003) *A people’s history of the United States*, New York, HarperCollins.

63. *Against forgetting: an Interview with Eyal Sivan*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/11/2012115131735888399.html> consulted on the 1st of March 2013

64. Interview with Ilan Pappé, 13/12/2012, at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter.

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