Fictions Embraced by an Israel at War

By David Grossman

Jerusalem
dangerous and deceptive plot line has become superimposed on the story that Israeli society tells itself about its conflict with the Palestinians. Since the outbreak of the current intifada two years ago, it is as if the Israeli mind has turned to a new page in the chronicle of the conflict and, at the same time, erased many of the pages that preceded it.

It's as if the 33 years of repression, occupation and humiliation that Israel imposed on the West Bank and Gaza between June 1967 and September 2000 vanished with the wave of a magic wand. The majority of Israelis take comfort today in believing that the horrifying deeds committed by Palestinian terrorists in the last two years somehow "balance the books" for those long years of subjugation and that all the guilt for their sufferings rests on Palestinian shoulders. Furthermore, they believe, the suicide bombings, and the broad support they have received from the Palestinian population, have revealed things about the Palestinians that ex post facto justify the injustices of the occupation. In a contorted way, many Israelis believe that the new wave of Palestinian terrorism has granted their country absolution for its problematic past.

Of course, the Israeli occupation is not the entire story. During those 33 years the Palestinians contributed their share to the march of blood and folly by being intractable in their positions and murderous in their actions. And we must not forget that the Six-Day War was not a war that Day War, our pinnacle of justice. And looking forward from that point in 1967 there is a kind of desert devoid of history, devoid of responsibility, devoid of blame, until we suddenly emerge from the miasma right at the Oslo accords, the proposals that Ehud Barak made to Yasser Arafat at Camp David and, after Camp David, like thunder on a bright and sunny day, the second intifada.

According to this story, the Palestinians suddenly exploded in September 2000 in an uncased natural eruption, spewing out lava and ash and igniting the entire region. They had no logical reason for exploding and there was no prior Israeli provocation. Ehud Barak made them a generous offer, and they betrayed him with an outburst of violence — because they, by their nature, are motivated solely by destructive, irrational forces that make impossible any future compromise with them.

This theory is also the basis of another right-wing claim that now seems to be accepted by the majority of Israelis. It is that the Oslo accords, and their supporters, were what in fact caused the second intifada. In other words, it wasn't the intolerable conditions in which the Palestinians lived for more than three decades. It wasn't the tactic support that most Israelis lent to the ongoing occupation, all the while persuading themselves that it was such an enlightened occupation that it was barely an occupation at all. It wasn't the refusal of every Israeli government before the second administration of Yitzhak Rabin to try to reach a true, if painful, accommodation with the Palestinians. It wasn't the doubling of the number of Israeli settlers in the territories in the years after Oslo. Nor was it the way in which Ehud Barak conducted the Camp David talks, presenting to Yasser Arafat as ultimatums proposals that, while they were generous compared with Israeli positions in the past, were entirely insufficient in Palestinian eyes.

None of these factors are now viewed as sufficient reason for a popular uprising by a subjugated and despairing people. No, it's the Oslo accords that are to blame, as if in the absence of Oslo the Palestinians would have come to terms with the Israeli occupation, accepting it tranquilly, even lovingly, to this very day, as if the Oslo agreements were a match, not a fire extinguisher.

Obviously, one of the reasons this story line has gained acceptance is that it seems to give a logical structure to a chaotic and threatening reality. Along the way, it also seems to justify the use of massive and unrelenting military force against the Palestinians.

But this view of reality is fraught with danger because it is simply not realistic. It's true that the Palestinians have committed serious errors and war crimes in the last two years. It also may well be true that, had they acted otherwise, they would have a state today. But if Israel is interested not just in punishing the Palestinians but also in extricating itself from the trap it's in, it must wake up and reinsert into the tragic story of the conflict those parts that have been expunged from its consciousness during the last two years. If we do not replant the recent intifada in its historical context, no chance of any minimal mutual understanding will sprout. And without context, we will never be truly cured.