

has the literary capacity to fulfill it by facilitating a “conceptual process of de-dichotomization” such as Barghouti contends is “a necessary condition for a just reconciliation” (1541). This process requires neither a Hegelian sacrifice of difference such as Barghouti rightly condemns nor a sacrifice of the life-sustaining narrative of a people and their state such as he recommends. It requires only openness to the difference of the narrative of the Torah, the “teaching” that can recall the timeless, prelinguistic, bodily recorded experience of interconnection with all the life of the earth through the mother. It requires willingness to take responsibility for the choices one makes when determining meaning, naming self and other.

For example, the Torah’s first reported instance of human speech is an act of naming that does violence to self and other when the namer, *adam*, a human being formed of the dust of the *adamah*, the earthen ground or soil, both breaks its nominal connection with the ground by changing its name to *iysh*, “man,” and arrogates to man the generative capacity of woman’s body (Gen. 2.23). However, the occasion for the naming speech arises only after the *adam* has been set into a “deep sleep” from which the biblical narrative does not state that the *adam* awakens, licensing a dream reading, a linguistic return to the (m)other within (Gen. 2.21). In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter observes that the naming speech is “[w]ritten in a double chiasmic structure,” a double structure of mirror inversion ([New York: Basic, 1981] 31).

In the mirrors of this speech it is possible to see a corrective exposure of mankind’s tendency to the dehumanized and dehumanizing state of disconnection that Julia Kristeva has taught us temporarily to call abjection. But, unlike the words of Ginsburgh and Barghouti, the words of the biblical naming speech are written in the language of self-questioning and renewal, a mode of linguistic relation that calls for improved relations among diverse human beings, new Halakhah. As I write this letter, an already anguished Lebanon is once again in turmoil. It is not only still rebuilding after the recent bombings that were Israel’s response to the kidnapping of its soldiers by Hezbollah, the self-styled “party of God,” whose warriors live among the civilian population and whose tunnels near the Israeli border contained

tens of thousands of the rockets that destroyed the lives of hundreds of Israelis. But Lebanon is also in shock after the assassination of yet another of its cabinet ministers by, it is commonly supposed, that same Syrian-backed party of God.

That Barghouti draws primarily on Israeli sources to document Israeli abuses attests to the spirit of autocritique and free speech that pervades Israeli cultural life. Syria, as of this writing, refuses to participate in a United Nations tribunal intended to investigate the murder of the Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. In Beirut, Hezbollah insists on the right to veto all government decisions, including whether Lebanon will participate in the same UN tribunal. Hezbollah is expected soon to try to bring down the Lebanese government. In nearby Iran, meanwhile, President Ahmadinejad with the enthusiastic support of Islamic fundamentalist leaders calls regularly for the obliteration of the Jewish state, and he is building Iran’s nuclear capabilities. What chance of survival would Barghouti’s proposed secular state stand in a region so increasingly in thrall to the homogenizing fanaticism of the violently religious? What chance would its moderate Muslim citizens stand, let alone its Jewish and Christian citizens? What would become of the Torah, the “teaching” that can begin to fulfill its promise of peace only when readers are willing to see within themselves the source of images of self and other, including the image of God?

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#### TO THE EDITOR:

My enjoyment of *PMLA*’s October issue was greatly marred by the inclusion of an anti-Israel conference paper whose one-sided rhetoric is hardly what one would expect from an academic publication constrained by the bounds of proof and context. The fact that Omar Barghouti, author of the paper in question, is a graduate student at an Israeli university already belies his claim about the systematic dehumanization of Palestinians in Israel. Thousands of Palestinians like him are welcomed into Israeli institutions, including the Israeli Parliament. At the peril of death, on the other hand, Israelis cannot set foot in most Arab countries.

A review of any Israeli publication will demonstrate widespread concern with human rights, including the treatment of minorities. Any poll will likewise demonstrate that a majority of Israeli citizens (not a small minority, as Barghouti claims) continue to favor the establishment a Palestinian state alongside Israel, despite constant terror attacks and shelling of Israel proper by Islamic militants, who repeatedly declare that their goal is to destroy Israel, politically, militarily, and demographically (hence the attempt by Palestinians to give birth within Israel, which is itself an abuse of Palestinian children by their own parents).

The cost of pointing at the world's favorite scapegoat and implying that if only Israel behaved a hundred percent correctly the whole world would be full of love and order is that, in the meantime, more alarming abuses of human rights are overlooked. Millions of children languish in brothels, are raped in Africa, are infected with AIDS, die of treatable diseases, and are sent to blow themselves up, but the world convenes to congratulate itself on exposing Israel's failings, both real and trumped up.

If *PMLA* has decided to publish material unrelated to the study of language and literature, one would hope that at least it would subject this material to a refereeing process as rigorous as that through which its standard articles are passed.

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### Reply:

In her response to the paper I presented in 2005 at The Humanities in Human Rights, a conference cosponsored by the MLA and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, Charlotte Berkowitz defends Judaism and Jews as if they were the object of my attack. By doing so, she not only misses the point—Israel's view of Palestinians as relative humans—but adopts the classic canard of equating criticism of Israel and of Zionism with anti-Semitism, the chief objective of which is to stifle debate on Israel's racist and colonial policies. Instead of recognizing that fundamentalist interpretations of the Halakha constitute one of the main factors nourishing Israel's racial discrimination against the indigenous population

of Palestine, Berkowitz tries to portray such interpretations as "atypical." Her claim is readily refuted by the fact that fanatic interpretations of Jewish law are propagated by influential rabbis and internalized by a wide proportion of Israeli society, secular and religious sectors alike.

Even before the creation of Israel, a core concept in this fundamentalist worldview was publicly espoused by religious Jewish leaders of immense influence, like Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine, who said, "The difference between a Jewish soul and the souls of non-Jews . . . is greater and deeper than the difference between a human soul and the souls of cattle (qtd. in Israel Shahak and Norton Mezvinsky, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* [London: Pluto, 1999] ix).

My contribution to the conference, however, did not revolve around the above point. My main contention was that Western-dominated approaches to human rights often leave out people in contexts of colonialism, military occupation, and other forms of national oppression, where "material and institutional foreclosures . . . make it impossible for certain historical subjects to lay claim to the discourse of rights itself," as the philosopher Judith Butler argues ("Israel/Palestine and the Paradoxes of Academic Freedom," *Radical Philosophy* 135 [2006]: 16). Israel and Zionism, the political ideology on which the state was created, have always perceived—and consequently treated—the native Palestinian Arabs as inferior and not fully human, shedding doubt on their equal entitlement to basic human rights.

This is precisely why Israel is so frequently compared to apartheid South Africa nowadays, even by key political figures, like Jimmy Carter in his recent book, *Palestine: Peace, Not Apartheid*. Years earlier, Desmond Tutu, in his article "Apartheid in the Holy Land" (*Guardian* 29 Apr. 2002, 21 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/comment/0,10551,706911,00.html>>) wrote:

I've been very deeply distressed in my visit to the Holy Land; it reminded me so much of what happened to us black people in South Africa. . . . Have our Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten their humiliation? Have they forgotten the collective punishment, the home demolitions, in their own history so soon?