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A conversation starter Yossi Klein Halevi's latest 'project' seeks to bridge political, ethnic divides

NJJN Blogs In "Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli

In "Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israell Paratroopers Who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided A Nation" (Harper, 2013), Yossi Klein Alelevi's award-winning masterpiece shows the triumphs and struggles of a burgeoning state through the eyes of the brave soldiers responsible for liberating Israel's holiest city. Kahntentions Nu Online

The historic overview is sweeping: starting from when the Kotel had an almost mythcal quality — as first-generation Israelis had never seen it in person — and ending in modern days with Israel widely considered a colonial power oppressing the land's rightful inhabitants. Greater MetroWest Middlesex/Monmouth

Halevi's two earlier books, "Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist: The Story of a Transformation" (Little Brown & Co., 1995), and "At The Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search For Hope With Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land" (Harper Perennial, 2001), recounts his personal growth.

But his newest work does not revolve around a narrative. Instead, "Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor" (Harper), which was released May 15, is a compilation of letters written to an anonymous resident of the Arab village of Anata (the Shuafat refugee camp), located about 500 meters from his French Hill apartment in east Jerusalem

The book that I've written is a complicated dance between reaching out to my neighbor as a neighbor, as a fellow human being, as a fellow religious person, as someone who ultimately shares the same space and the same fate with me, on the one hand," he said in a phone interview, "while at the same time being very mindful of how deeply ingrained in Palestinian and Arab consciousnes is the notion of my lack of legitimacy, my lack of

In the book he writes that for years Palestinians and Muslims have told him that they don't have a problem with the Jewish religion. However



Yossi Klein Halevi







We have no sympathy for your insistence that you are a people, with the right to national sovereignty, because we know you aren't a people but a religion

That, Halevi told me, is the heart of the conflict

"An Israeli majority has existed for a long time supporting a two-state solution, in principle. In practice, most Israelis, including myself, don't believe the conditions are right for a two-state solution so long as there isn't any movement on the Palestinian side to begin to come to terms with who the Jews are," said Halevi, a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, a Jewish think-tank based in Jerusalem and New York. "And if the Jews are a fake people, as [President of the Palestiniar Authority] Mahmoud Abbas says, then how do you make peace with their state?"

Still, Halevi admits that the other side of the wall has a point. In "Letters" he simplifies their case as well as any explanation I've ever heard. Palestinians have often used this hypothetical

If a stranger squatted in your home, would you accept dividing your house with him? Even if he gave you three rooms and kept "only" two, would you regard that compromise as fair

In my conversation with Halevi I joked that the book's commitment to balance would likely result in heavy criticism from everyone. That's already happened, he said, even before the full release

"It's so interesting to see the responses that I've been getting from my book," he said. The right-wing response is, "Letters to my Palestinian neighbor? Surely you mean the Arab residents of the land of

"And on the left, the response is often, 'Why are you writing to an anonymous neighbor? You know they exist as a people, don't you?

But one shouldn't mistake his understanding of the plight of the Palestinians as a rejection of Israel's legitimacy.

"Even though emotionally I agree with the settlers that all of the land is ours from the river to the sea, there's another people that's sitting there and we have to figure out how do we live with these other people?"

Later he added, "I'm stretching my capacity for empathy with my Palestinian neighbor as far as I'm able to, without forfeiting the integrity of my narrative.... I affirm our narrative and I don't deny

Besides Halevi's attempts to communicate with his Arab neighbors, he also hopes that "Letters" will help lead right- or left-leaning Jews away from the edges and toward the middle

"On the liberal side of the equation there's often such an obsessive focus on the Palestinian perspective that many left-wing Jews have lost their instinct for Jewish self-preservation, and tend to pay lip service to the extraordinary threat that Israel is facing on almost every one of its borders."

But on the far right, he said, "you have a blindness to how Palestinians define themselves as collective, which mirrors a blindness in the Arab and Muslim world toward how Jewish people define themselves as a collective.

I asked Halevi about one of my favorite scenes from "Like Dreamers," intense battle between Israell and Egyptian soldiers during the Yorn Kippur War, a cease-fire was called. The immediate reaction was for several soldiers on both sides to put down their weapons, run into the streets, and hug their counterparts, at least until their commanders ordered them to return to their positions. Was Halevi inspired by this incredible humanity displayed by peoples demonstrating that, despite the rhetoric, they are more than two dimensions?

His response was less optimistic than I expected.

"I'm very wary of lowering my guard in the Middle East. I'm very wary of a return to the self-delusion of the Oslo years," he sald, sighing, "I think that reconciliation is more likely to come between Israel and parts of the Arab world through a shared fear of Iran than it is through any emotional embrace among cousins.... I'm not writing with the false hope of some imminent breakthrough."

Halevi often describes "Letters" as a project, rather than a book. He hopes that Palestinians will read it and respond, so they can have a conversation "about our conflicting stories and agree that our narratives will remain in conflict, but that we need to accommodate each other's conflicting To this end he said that the book will soon be translated into Arabic and available for free download online.

His intention, he said, is for "Letters" to "trigger the first public conversation between an Israeli and Palestinian and people of the Arab and Muslim world about our story, about our legitimacy. Why we're



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"I think it's past time for that kind of conversation."

NJJN, in partnership with The Community Relations Committee (CRC) of Jewish Federation of Greater NUM, in partnership with The Community Relations Committee (CRC) of Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest New Jersey, will present a discussion between Yosis Klein Halevi and Imam Abdulliah Antepli on the future of Israel and her neighbors on Tuesday, May 22, at 7:30 p.m. The program, "A Jew and a Muslim on the Future of the Middle East," moderated by NUM editor Gabe Kahn, will take place at Alex Aidekman Family Jewish Community Campus, Whippany, Halevi's latest book, "Letters to My Palestinan Neighbor," will be available for purchase and signing. Tickes are \$18 online, \$25 at the door, free for students with valid ID. Go to jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/events/halevi-antepli/.

Gabe Kahn is the editor of New Jersey Jewish News; gkahn@njjewishnews.com; @sgabekahn

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screenwriter.

Max Eisenberg

I had a little extra motivation to read this book as a film I wrote, "A Call to Remember" was reviewed by Rabib Rosenberg. To see such a great collection of films that deal with Holocaust subject matter is extremely important. Rabib Rosenberg's own family experience no doubt played an intergral role in putting this book together; he has devoted his whole life to making sure the horrors his family experienced first-hand would never be forgotten. The book is not only a valuable resource for study and education, but an important reminder of the impact the holocaust had on countiess lives. Rabib Rosenberg's book should be on everyone's shelves and in every school to remind us continually of man's inhumanity against his fellow man. and ultimately, the triumph of the human spirit. I couldn't give this book a higher recommendation. I had a little extra motivation to read this book as a film I wrote, "A Call

This book in particular blends the specific cognitive, historical aspects of the atrocity with excellent literature which helps meet the new common core standards through the pictures, questions, discussions and research associated with each story. The New Jersey State Holocaust Commission recommends the book for the classroom and community. "This is a revised and updated version of the 2014 publication. The New Jersey State Holocaust Commission recommends the book for the classroom and community.

Amy Goldblatt May 21, 2018

Halevi.and other liberal.zionists don't have a leg to.stand on after Israel's massacre of 62 Palestinians. The base criminality of the Israeli regime is unprecedented. After Apartheid South Africa murdered 60 at Sharpsville it immediately became a pariah state. When Nazi Germany invaded Poland the world went to war against it. But, Israel perpetrates its atrocities with impunity knowing that Jewish money, media, and influence will allow it to whitewash its evil. If that doesn't work they invoke the Holocaust.

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