

**EDWARD SAID: A MAN OF
'MUTUAL
RECONCILIATION'**

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It is only once in a while that in history there emerges a figure with such multi-dimensional influence as Edward Said. I never ceased being amused and inspired by the force of his personality, his sheer intellectual energy, and the depth and breadth of his interests, as well as his dedication to the cause of ameliorating the conditions of human existence.

Edward Said will be remembered as a highly accomplished man of literature, arts, and cultural and political discourse, as exemplified in his two widely influential books, *Orientalism*, and *Culture and Imperialism*, and his fine and sensitively moving autobiography, *Out of Place*. However, for me personally what absorbed me most was his participation in the struggle for the right of the Palestinians for free self-determination, without prejudice to the desire of Jewish people to live within a peaceful and secure Israel.

In all his inquiries, writings, commentaries and activism in support of a just resolution of the Palestinian problem, he rarely neglected the plight of the Jewish people in history. He described the Palestinians as ‘the victims of the victims’. For Said, the Palestinian issue was not only personal, but also a serious concern in pursuit of human reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. He directed much of his energy and activism towards achieving a resolution of the Palestinian problem on this basis for most of his adult life.

This is what guided his involvement in the Palestine National Council under Yasser Arafat and his initial devotion to the Palestinian leader as a symbol of the Palestinian struggle for freedom and independence. In fact, he was both morally and intellectually instrumental in helping Arafat and his Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in the Algiers conference of 1988 to shift from a belligerent position to a policy of ‘mutual reconciliation’ towards Israel. As an influential Palestinian American academic and activist he was happy to work with President Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of State George Shultz to achieve this objective.

While recognising the right of the Palestinians to resist Israeli occupation, and refraining from any moral or political repudiation of the Palestinian intifida (uprising), it was his desire for a policy of ‘mutual reconciliation’ that led Said to work hard to explore the common grounds of humanity between the Palestinians and Israelis. He pushed for the mainstream from both sides to take the centre stage in rejection of political extremism, religious and cultural bigotry and claims of historical superiority, and to build bridges of understanding and trust. He extended a hand of friendship and cooperation to many like-minded Israelis

for this purpose. One of the finest projects that he set up was his joint enterprise with the famous Israeli musician Daniel Barenboim to provide musical training for Israeli and Palestinian children. He viewed the freedom and security of the Israelis and Palestinians as intertwined and indivisible. He

firmly believed that ‘only a state that brought the two peoples together in a unified political community could bring enduring peace and justice’.

It was precisely within this stream of thinking that he could not * support the Oslo accords, signed with so much fanfare in September 1993 and the so-called peace process that they spawned. He could not embrace the claim from both sides of the divide that the Oslo peace process would bring an end to the suffering of the Palestinian people and deliver them a just peace. Hence his criticism of Arafat and some of his associates for concluding the accords. His main concern was that many among those who led Israel were engaged in a hypocritical, theatrical approach: on the one hand they talked about peace and acknowledged the right of the Palestinians eventually to have an independent state of their own; on the other hand, and at the same time they created ‘facts on the ground’ by instituting ever-increasing repressive measures against the Palestinians, and establishing more settlements on the Palestinian lands, and expanding Israel’s boundaries to make the creation of such a state virtually impossible.

He was subsequently tormented by the idea of a two-state solution that the US proposed and that the right-wing Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, publicly embraced. He rejected that solution and the ‘road map’ devised in pursuit of it. While progressively weakened by his illness, he penned a brilliant article early this year to clarify persuasively that the road map was one which would lead to no where, given Sharon’s determination first to bomb the Palestinians

into the stone age, and then dictate a settlement which would be entirely on Israeli terms.

Said kept warning the Israeli Right and Washington, which following the tragic events of 11 September 2001 adopted Sharon’s agenda, * against humiliating the Palestinians and making them feel powerless. In his view, a combination of these two was enough to drive any people to the point of maximum desperation. He saw the phenomenon of Palestinian suicide bombing more as an outcome of such a development and the failure to deliver the Palestinian people a just peace than anything else. He never ever approved of suicide bombing as a tactic in Palestinians’ nationalist struggle, but he could understand the driving

factors behind it.

As the Bush Administration and the Sharon-led Israeli right united in a campaign against terror without making the necessary distinction . between what constituted terrorism and what formed a nationalist resistance on the part of an occupied people, Said could not understand how the world's governments could remain passive in the face of US-backed Israeli atrocities. He was often pained and angered by the sight of a deliberate Israeli strategy designed to 'obliterate' the Palestinians as a people and society. He increasingly grew impatient with Israeli and American lies and fabrications about the Palestinians, and their periodic deceptive approaches to addressing the very Palestinian plight which they had played a key role in creating in one form or another.

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Said remained so tormented and angry at the suffering and devastation of the Palestinian people that he said that was what kept him going in facing the challenge of cancer from which he had suffered for many years. Even when he was in his death bed prior to his permanent departure on 25 September 2003, he still managed to *• write one last article, entitled 'Dignity, Solidarity and the Penal Colony' as the final testimony of his commitment to the Palestinian cause and an expression of his appreciation of the Palestinians for maintaining their human dignity and resistance in support of freedom and independence in the face of all adversities. He praised the solidarity of the peoples of the world with the Palestinians, but admonished the Arab regimes for paying no more than lip service to the Palestinian resistance. Concluding his article with one last irony, he wrote:

'Isn't it astonishing that all the signs of popular solidarity that . Palestine and the Arabs receive, occur with no comparable sign of solidarity and dignity for ourselves, that others admire and respect us more than we do ourselves? Isn't it time we caught up with our own status and made certain that our representatives here and elsewhere realise, as a first step, that they are fighting for a just and noble cause, and that they have nothing to apologise for or anything to be embarrassed about? On the contrary, they should be proud of what their people have done and proud also to represent them.'

There was nothing more important to Said than human dignity and the ability to maintain

it no matter what the circumstances. He personally was a living example of this, and left us with a rich and enduring legacy which will continue to challenge us humanly and intellectually for a long time to come. Said has physically gone, but he will continue to live with us in every direction in which we turn for inspiration, creativity and challenges.

I would like to conclude with a short poem, written by Professor Richard Falk, a very close friend and intellectual companion of Said about the passing of a very fine Palestinian, Palestinian American and world citizen, as well as a thinker, activist and torch bearer of humanity per excellence.

When Words Fail

In memory of Edward Said

The eye sees but cannot tell
The heart knows but cannot say
The mind weeps but cannot cry
Such feelings do no more

than announce such a death

To feel this loss
alone in moments of shared silence
comes closer to words than words
as even apt and precious words
die of grief on our tongue
never to be born ..
or possibly, stillborn
escaping as if exhaled smoke
escaping as birds streaking south
as autumn vanishes

And yet this loss is far from forgetfulness
the heartbeat of memory lives as before his words, his passion, his
grace
remind us daily of anguished absence

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yet equally of haunting presence as vital as the
lives we lead.

