

Nusseibeh, Sari, with Anthony David: Once Upon a Country. A Palestinian Life. Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York 2006.

How does one regard a good man in a dark time? With joy, obviously, but also with sorrow. Seneca said in one of his letters that you must either hate the world or imitate it, but there are few things in this world so stirring as a man who neither hates it nor imitates it, but in the name of what is best in it resists what is worst in it. Such a man secures hope against illusion, and by example refutes any argument against the plausibility of historical action. It would be too hard to act if decency itself had still to be invented. And yet the uncommonness of such a man casts a long shadow over the faith in eventual justice or eventual peace, because the figure is so lonely against the ground. The good man in a dark time is the unrepresentative man. He has the honor of an anomaly. He marks the distance that still has to be traveled. And how much, after all, can a single individual accomplish, all the uplift notwithstanding? Heroes are not policies.

Sari Nusseibeh's book provokes such an ambivalence — more precisely, such a double-mindedness — about the malleability of history, but not an ambivalence about itself. "Once Upon a Country" is a deeply admirable book by a deeply admirable man. It is largely a political memoir, about a reluctantly political Palestinian trying to bring politics to his people, as the forces of occupation, religion and terrorism interfere with the very possibility of politics. Nusseibeh's book is written out of a refreshingly candid awareness that the reasons for the persistence of the Palestinians in their stateless misery are multiple and complicated. He is the very rare participant in the Israeli-Palestinian disputation who does not spend himself in fits of self-justification; the rights and the wrongs, in his view, are cruelly distributed across all the sides in this apparently ceaseless conflict. Nusseibeh is plainly a rational man, but he does not dwell in reason's neighborhood.

He is one of the Arab aristocrats of Jerusalem, the scion of a family descended from one of the tribal leaders who accompanied Muhammad on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the seventh century, and whose brother, the first Muslim high judge in Jerusalem, was charged by the caliph Omar with the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Nusseibeh, whose early years were dispersed between Damascus and East Jerusalem, relates the

role of his high-born family with an affectionate irony; there is a certain noblesse in his book, but there is no grandiosity. He is keenly alive to the injuries that the past may inflict upon the present. He makes a point to tell the legend of Omar's refusal to pray in Christianity's most sacred church, because "he feared later Muslim leaders might be tempted to turn the glorious church into a mosque." We know from our own time what the caliph was dreading. In Jerusalem, as in many afflicted regions of our allegedly globalized planet, the past is not a foreign country.

Nusseibeh is by training a philosopher, and married the daughter of one of Oxford's most devastating philosophical minds. A scholar of Islamic philosophy of the Middle Ages, Nusseibeh regularly, and affectingly, turns to medieval thought for modern enlightenment. (He even has kind words for Leo Strauss's method of interpretation. The Straussian from the P.L.O.!) From al-Ghazali's discussion of miracles, he grasps that things may change because their elements may be manipulated for new ends and combined into new forms, and so "it's up to us to turn hatred into understanding." From al-Farabi, he infers that the ideal government is not one "run by God or his prophet," but by "a wise and learned ruler," and he teaches this secular Muslim notion to the perfervid Islamicists at Bir Zeit University. From Avicenna's theory that "our knowledge is a construct of the will," he learns to reject "inherent identities" in favor of "a theory of identity as a dynamic function of the will, whether ... of the self or of the nation." And this Islamic speculation about the accountability of the self and the nation puts him in mind of a recent visit to Monticello, where "what was so astounding for me about Jefferson, in contrast to Robespierre, say, or any of the Arab revolutionary leaders, was the systematic manner in which he went about putting flesh and bones on the conception of liberty by building free institutions." "Once Upon a Country" may be (I do not know for sure, I do not read Arabic) the most naturally democratic book to have emerged out of Palestinian nationalism.

Whatever the pertinence of medieval philosophy to modern politics, Palestine is not exactly a place for contemplation, and so the scholar given to metaphysical reveries and cafe afternoons – how do you say luftmensch in Arabic? – is irresistibly drawn into his people's troubles. Nusseibeh was in charge of the media campaign for the first intifada and dodged Israeli soldiers to smuggle bags of cash to comrades in hiding. During the Oslo

years, the philosophy professor was an “engaged – sometimes bemused but mostly anguished — spectator.” Nusseibeh recounts his political activity in vivid, witty and excessive detail. He believes that the only moral and practical resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the sharing of the land between the peoples, two free and sovereign states, Israel and Palestine — what used to be called “partition” and is now called the “two-state solution”; and he believes that political violence will fail to achieve this goal, and is an evil.

“The Palestinian Arabs and the Jews are natural allies,” he remarks, “not adversaries.” His book is a personal history of the Palestinian nationalist struggle – and its failure – from the 1967 war to the stalemate of the present day. His role in that struggle has been to formulate principles and to establish committees. He was especially concerned with building the infrastructure, and the spirit, of a state.

Any person who has been involved in a cause, and pity the person who has not, knows the pressures that political ardor puts on intellectual honesty. When one’s universe is separated into sides, and one has chosen among the sides, the surest signs of intellectual honesty are expressions of sympathy for one’s other and antipathy for one’s own. “Once Upon a Country” is not only a celebration of Palestinian national life, it is also a criticism of it — a ferocious criticism. Nusseibeh despises its maximalist hallucinations, and prefers to emphasize “the liberation of the human being” over “a return to the seized lands of the past.” He was the P.L.O. representative in Jerusalem in 2001 and 2002, but quickly fell out of Arafat’s favor; and while he respects Arafat, the portrait that he paints of him is rather withering. He complains that Arafat’s manner of rule was “a formula for a Baathist-type dictatorship.” When Arafat presided over the Palestinian struggle, “the Palestinians were once again falling into that perennial trap,” he remarks. “They thought somehow the ‘world’ would step in like a deus ex machina and set things right.” Arafat, he says, “clearly blew it by not closing some sort of deal at Camp David.”

Nusseibeh also worries that the Palestinian Authority is developing a reputation as “a sleazy Arab kleptocracy,” and describes the second intifada as “a catastrophic slapdash brawl” and “a ruinous and sanguinary fit of madness.” His contempt for Hamas abounds. It is “a political-religious

movement systematically throwing shackles on the mind.” He deplores “the cult of violence, the myth of the martyr and the delusions of actually ‘punishing’ the Israelis.” He insists that the Hamas charter “sounds as if it came straight from the pages of Der Stürmer.” These sterling opinions are proof not only of Nusseibeh’s extraordinary intelligence, but also of his extraordinary courage. And while he imperils himself with his attempts to persuade his brethren to accept a two-state solution and to reject Hamas, the fearless progressives at The New York Review of Books promote a one-state solution and dare to wonder whether the ascendancy of Hamas is “the last chance for peace.”

I do not mean to say that Nusseibeh is a “good Palestinian.” He hates Israel’s occupation, and its settlements in the territories, and its military harshness, and its security fence. But he does not hate Israel. His respect for it, his curiosity about it, his entanglement with it, is apparent on almost every page. About his first visit to the Jewish state, in 1967, he remembers that “just as I had suspected since listening to the Beatles over enemy radio waves, they were normal people just like us.”

In 1968, Nusseibeh studied Hebrew and worked on a kibbutz in the Galilee, where “what impressed me most was their idealism.” In his treatment of the first intifada, he exhilaratingly declares that “a Manichean view of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, with one side all light, the other all darkness, is impossible to take.” And in perhaps the most unforgettable sentence in his book, Nusseibeh summarizes the situation this way: “The Jew seeks space to continue living, while the Arab defends his space to the death.” The observation is impartial, and chilling.

In early 1991, Nusseibeh spent three months in an Israeli prison, but still I wish he did not compare the Israeli prisons, for all their asperities, to the Gulag: there is an independent judiciary in Israel to which Palestinians have frequent and fair recourse, and the grossness of Nusseibeh’s historical analogy flies in the face of what he otherwise knows about the democratic character of the Jewish state. And his account of the war of 1948-49 is grotesque. “It was never a fair fight,” he writes, “nor could it have been.”

Since this misrepresentation is becoming a regular feature of the new anti-Zionist discourse in America, it is worth pointing out that recent scholarship — incomplete, to be sure, because the relevant Arab archives are closed to scholars — shows that the Jewish state enjoyed no military superiority in the war into which it was born, not least because the Arabs of Palestine were joined by the armies of Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq, which were augmented by troops from Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Nusseibeh, rather astonishingly, does not even mention this invasion, which was undertaken to destroy a state whose legitimacy had just been established by the United Nations. He treats the founding conflagration as a Palestinian-Israeli war, when it was an Arab-Israeli war. And the fact that Israel did not lose it does not mean that Israel was ordained to win it.

Yet there is nothing mean or heartless in Nusseibeh's writing about Israel. And there is much in his account of Israel's policies of occupation that should make Israelis and their supporters squirm. Since, insofar as one can believe in countries, Israel is one of the countries in which I believe, this book certainly made me squirm. The futility and the brutality of some of Israel's actions beyond its borders are abundantly clear. Not all of them, to be sure: though hideous as a matter of symbolism, the fence is effective as a matter of safety. But almost the entirety of the Israeli settlement of the West Bank has been a moral and strategic blunder of historic proportions; and whereas it is difficult to gainsay the use of force against terrorists, the sowing of southern Lebanon with cluster bombs in the final hours of last summer's war was an act of genuine malignity.

But even more discomfiting than Nusseibeh's picture of the Israelis is his picture of the Palestinians. There is a civil war in Palestine, and the resolution of the external conflict will be determined by the outcome of the internal conflict. There are no grounds for any optimism about that outcome, no basis for any confidence that secularity and modernity and diplomacy will prevail. Israel, with all its power, can do little to influence it, except at the margins; only the Palestinians can determine the character of Palestine, and it is an insult to them, an imperialist's insult, to suggest otherwise.

But consider only this season's commotions. When Palestinians are unhappy with the composition of their government, they fire their guns at

one another. When they are happy about the composition of their government, they fire their guns into the air. What they will not do, it appears, is stop firing their guns. And so Sari Nusseibeh's formidable achievement – his articulation of a liberal nationalism, his championship of nonviolence in the midst of savagery, his humane understanding of an inhumane predicament — leaves a drop of despair, because of how exceptional it is.

*Leon Wieseltier: Sympathy for the Other,
in "New York Times" 01.04.2007.*
