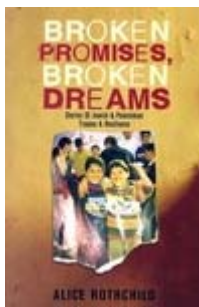


Toward Healing Trauma in the Holy Land

A review of



Broken Promises, Broken Dreams: Stories of Jewish and Palestinian Trauma and Resilience

by Alice Rothchild

Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007. 263 pp. ISBN 978-0-7453-2596-5. \$26.95, paperback

Reviewed by

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Broken Promises, Broken Dreams: Stories of Jewish and Palestinian Trauma and Resilience, written by Alice Rothchild, is an ambitious book—a combination of personal revelation, travelogue, psychopolitical theory, and interviews with selected informants. The resulting mélange at times feels chaotic and emotionally draining, but it accurately mirrors the experience of the Holy Land itself. While the constant movement back and forth between personal, factual, and theoretical discourse makes it hard for the reader to absorb all that is being offered, the book has an almost visceral emotional impact. If in the end it feels somewhat

scattered and unresolved, it may be because both the author and the situation are still in turmoil.

As a politically progressive Jewish woman of the diaspora, Rothchild uses her own inner conflicts to help explain the complex and heartbreaking situation confronting Israeli Jews and Palestinians today. She is at her best when describing her own transformation from a typical Jewish teenager having a love affair with Israel to someone who sees Israel not only as a victim but also as the neighborhood bully. She is eloquent in her description of growing up Jewish in the dark shadow of the Holocaust and the redemptive sunshine of Israel, as well as in recounting the hero status granted to Holocaust survivors and to Jewish soldiers and the collective denial of the *nakba* (catastrophe) that the founding of the state of Israel created for Palestinians. She is unflinching in describing her own early, adolescent sense of Jewish entitlement and disdain for Arabs and Sephardic Jews, and later, her fierce avoidance of the topic as her growing political awareness made Israel a source of intellectual discomfort. In describing her journey, she provides a case study of the powerful forces conspiring to keep her—and by implication, many others—from seeing that there are, in fact, two compelling sides to this story.

In the first section of the book, Rothchild focuses on two Israelis, a psychiatrist and a social activist. These personal narratives elaborate the author's premises about Jewish Israeli psychology, documenting how two women of conscience have come to grips with the moral ambiguities of the situation. The stories are fascinating, and they provide an effective antidote to the stereotypical media presentation of Israelis as rigid, generally right-wing, and always anti-Palestinian. If the reader sometimes has difficulty discerning the key points, it is not due to the author's lack of sympathy or observational acuity but perhaps to the opposite—Rothchild appears to be so determined not to oversimplify her subjects, to include all their contradictory thoughts, feelings, and actions, that the reader ends up a bit overwhelmed by the complexity.

The second section of the book focuses on Palestinians and the current situation in the West Bank and Gaza. Here Rothchild intermingles personal details and quotations from individuals she meets on her travels with professional and political observations. Using this technique, Rothchild effectively conveys not just the irrationality of a “protection wall” and checkpoints that largely separate Palestinians from other Palestinians but also the heavy emotional and spiritual burden placed on those who have to negotiate the barriers on a daily basis. Similarly, she uses her medical training and experience to convey her shock and dismay at the lack of access to basic health care existing within a few miles of one of the best health care systems in the world.

This section provides a vivid portrait of the current situation and a genuinely respectful glimpse into Palestinian life. I suspect that Rothchild was trying to provide a balanced presentation, highlighting the strength and resilience of Palestinians under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Unfortunately, the focus on social conditions is a bit afield from the book's primary theme and ultimately distracts the reader from the main message.

Broken Promises, Broken Dreams is subtitled *Stories of Jewish and Palestinian Trauma and Resilience*. Throughout the book, Rothchild uses concepts from trauma theory to explain seemingly irresolvable conflicts and dilemmas. There are references to Israel's stance as the “ultimate victim” and examples of Israel doing to the Palestinians some of the same terrible things that were done to them. Rothchild is bold when she speaks what is rarely spoken—that unchecked, the psychological need for safety can lead to counterproductive social policies, with *security* being the most holy word in Israel. She also identifies the need to see Palestinians as the enemy as a critical unifying ideology for Israel and notes that unconscious projection may be contributing to increased violence of all forms.

The role of Palestinians in playing out the trauma dynamic is also given some attention; for example, the Israeli psychiatrist comments that Palestinians often play the role of a battered wife,

trying to please the abusive husband and at the same time to hurt him. Rothchild is certainly not the first to recognize that the state of Israel is enacting the role of trauma survivor—and sometimes flipping over to become the perpetrator. She provides compelling examples drawn from the experience of participants on both sides.

The trauma lens provides a powerful framework for understanding the complex interpersonal and social dynamics in play, and the insights provided here are important. However, many of the observations about the impact of trauma come through the words of the interviewees or through personal reflections, and Rothchild stops short of putting forth a coherent, trauma-based analysis of the situation. No works of trauma theory are cited or listed in the Recommended Readings, and nowhere does she pull her observations together to offer an overall critical view. As a result, the reader has to work to put the pieces together. In addition, the author misses the opportunity to show how the individual acts of courage and stories of resilience she documents, when considered collectively, constitute a potentially profound healing force.

Since Judith Herman (1992) published her landmark work on trauma and recovery, psychologists have come to recognize the power of the trauma model to explicate a wide range of interpersonal, historical, and political phenomena. Recent research in a variety of disciplines, from neuropsychology to political science, have documented mechanisms through which violence and trauma have a lasting impact on our emotions, our behavior, and our social structures (Kirmayer, Lemelson, & Barad, 2007). A robust body of work has developed examining “historical trauma,” including the long-term consequences of the Holocaust (Rousseau, 2005). One of the most hopeful aspects of this blossoming field of trauma studies is the recognition that *recovery is possible*—that once the unspeakable is spoken, once the denial is broken through, powerful healing forces are released. Rothchild's book documents the impact of trauma in Israel and Palestine but doesn't address the possibility of recovery.

According to Herman, there are three main stages in recovery—safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. Using this analytic framework raises some interesting questions. Perhaps Israel's "security wall" is ineffective and largely a political move, but it may also be providing a sense of safety necessary for Israelis to begin healing. Yes, Israel's focus on the Holocaust feels relentless, but maybe it is a necessary part of remembrance. Perhaps the connections between Israelis and Palestinians that Rothchild describes in her search for the "two narratives" could ultimately lead to a reestablishment of the harmonious coexistence between Jews and Palestinians that was the norm before 1948. A fuller exploration of the trauma model—including the stages of healing and recovery—might have led to a different discussion.

Broken Promises, Broken Dreams is an interesting and provocative read for anyone who is even mildly concerned about the current situation in the Holy Land. It provides a superb example of how a psychological analysis can shed light on political issues that appear entrenched and intractable. Those who are interested in the study of peace, conflict and violence, community psychology, international psychology, personality and social issues, and, of course, trauma psychology will find this book of particular relevance.

Rothchild succeeds in describing the complex psychological conflicts underlying the current political stalemate. She conveys something of the tangled histories of Israel and Palestine, tells the personal stories of several ordinary but nonetheless heroic Israelis and Palestinians, and analyzes the impact of current Israeli political and social policies. The book is chock full of information about both political and social life in Israel and Palestine. Most important, it provides a human face to both sides of the conflict. Despite its flaws, *Broken Promises, Broken Dreams* is a gut-wrenching ride through the bumpy and unyielding landscape of the Holy Land.

Rothchild ends *Broken Promises, Broken Dreams* with an

anguished cry for people to look clearly and honestly at the situation, to move through their own fears and resistances and to look squarely at the narrative of the other. Her call to break the silence is an important first step in moving toward true healing. However, it is only a first step, and it leaves the reader wishing she had gone further. It feels as if Rothchild has reached a certain stage in her own process, and the book can go only as far as she has gone. Early on, Rothchild acknowledges that she is taking a stand that will be unpopular among many. She states:

I was clearly bumping up against powerful agendas and deeply felt historical wounds. I began to understand that I was perceived as dangerous.... I found that for many, publicly stating that Jews could be victimizers as well as victims, and that Palestinians are equally human and deeply hurting, is unthinkable and a betrayal of Jewish loyalty and identity. (p. 14)

Rothchild is right in this fear. In *Broken Promises, Broken Dreams* she takes a courageous position that may prove highly unpopular in some sectors. I hope she is not deterred by whatever criticism comes. She has confronted the truth, and this is the first step toward healing. I, for one, am eager to see where she goes next.

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