

Nakba: How Israel Stole Palestine's Culture, Science and National Heritage

Nakba Steals All: Land, Life, Libraries

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There are thousands of evils the Israeli Occupation does every day.

Just as there were similar evils of the Nakba which preceded it and served as its harbinger. But we're used to focusing on the big and obvious ones like land theft, expulsion, rape and murder. In some ways the most plaintive and affecting evils of Nakba/Occupation are far less momentous, and even commonplace.



Palestinian books stolen by Israel during Nakba (right)

After 1948, Israel determined that its citizens would take the property “abandoned” (in Israeli jargon) by “fleeing” (again, in Israeli jargon) Israeli Palestinians. Hundreds of villages and entire neighborhoods of cities like Jerusalem were “emptied” of their previous inhabitants. In this way, many contemporary Israelis find themselves today living in homes from which their original inhabitants were dispossessed. One well-known example is the [Jerusalem home](#) the NY Times provides for its Israel bureau chief, currently Jodi Rudoren. Before the Nakba, it belonged to the family of Gada Karmi. Various attempts to engage Ethan Bronner and the Times itself in a dialogue about the irony of the situation have fallen on deaf ears.

Now, [AFP publishes a touching account](#) of the theft of entire Palestinian libraries:

As war came to Jerusalem in May 1948, Palestinian Omar Saleh Barghouti fled his home, leaving behind hundreds of his books, including years worth of his diaries. He would never see them again.

Unknown to him, as the battle over the creation of the Jewish state raged, teams of Israeli librarians and soldiers were collecting tens of thousands of books from Palestinian homes in Jerusalem, Haifa, Jaffa and elsewhere - including 256 from Barghouti's home in the Katamon neighborhood.

...After two years in exile in [Egypt](#), Barghouti moved to the West Bank city of Ramallah, reaching out to Jewish friends in what was now Israel to try and [sic] get his books back.

"He explained when you lose your furniture, household items, you can replace them. But with his books, it was really as if he lost the woman he loved most in his life," she said.

His experience mirrored that of other Palestinians who lost their book collections, including intellectual Khalil Sakakini, who wrote longingly about his books from exile in Egypt.

The pain of this story involves *who* the thieves were. Not the usual bullies and thugs of the security forces who you might expect to pillage and loot. But rather the august Israeli National Library, housed for decades at the Hebrew University:

The Barghouti family tried for years without success to locate the books, but until 2012, Rasha had no idea that they were most likely held in a basement in Israel's National Library.

There they are part of a collection of around 30,000 books, marked "AP" - "abandoned property" - and accessible only by special request.

Just as Hannah Arendt used the telling term "the banality of evil" to portray Adolph Eichmann in relation to the enormity of his crimes, so we can attribute such a phrase to the librarians who served as willing enforcers of Nakba dispossession. Listen to one such describe, out of what he views as the best of intentions, how this evil plays out:

Gish Amit...was looking for a PhD research topic at the National Library when he came across the collection, which includes religious books, personal writings, textbooks and poetry.

"What I found out was that around 30,000 books were taken from Palestinians, mostly from private homes...They took every book that was found, then they started to catalogue. The whole process took something like 10 to 15 years."

Uri Palit, an elderly Israeli whose Jerusalem home is furnished with ornate furniture imported from [Syria](#), became involved in the cataloguing process in 1963 after studying for a degree in Middle East studies with Arabic and Turkish.

"My dream was that by the time I would have finished studying, there would be peace between Israel and the Arab states so I'd be of service to (diplomatic) relations," he said.

"But my hope was not realized."

...He took a job in the Oriental section of the National Library. He worked there

for around a decade, recalling the special serial numbers and cataloguing process which he says showed the library always intended to preserve the books for eventual return to their owners.

“We wrote the name of the owner in pencil on the books... because we wanted to return it someday when there is peace,” Palit told AFP.

Amit, who is writing a book on the subject, says documents including letters from the then-library director show that Israeli researchers “considered these books to be very valuable, and they really wanted them.”

“They said we are saving these books, but at the same time they said we want these books, we need these books, we will look after them better than the Palestinians... so it has a lot to do with colonial attitudes,” he said.

He acknowledges that the library catalogued the books carefully and kept them separate from the general collection, but questions why no efforts were made to return them.

“War is an ugly thing, but what’s important is what happened in the decades afterwards,” he said.

“The worst thing is the library’s refusal to acknowledge the injustice that was done to the Palestinians. When I talked to the librarians there, they kept telling me that this was an act of rescue, even today. This I cannot accept.”

And he says the library refused to cooperate when Arab-Israeli parliamentarian Jamal Zahalka requested that Sakakini’s books be handed to the Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah.

“They said they couldn’t do anything unless Zahalka would provide them with a complete list of Sakakini’s books. This is ridiculous. The librarians are the only ones who can look through the books and make this kind of list.”

Here is the embodiment of the evil that lies at the heart of this tale and relates to so much more evil of Nakba:

Palit, who spent his entire career at the library after “falling in love” with books, rejects claims that the books were effectively stolen.

“It’s their narrative, but it’s not true. They had abandoned their houses, their whole villages.”

But as a book-lover, he acknowledges a twinge of sympathy at the thought of Palestinians mourning their lost libraries.

When I read Sakakini I was sad, because I’m also bound to my books, it’s an intimate relationship with books that I have,” he said.

“So I felt empathy,” he added, with a sigh. But we couldn’t act otherwise.”



Elijah admonishes Ahab and Jezebel after the stoning of Naboth (Sir Francis Dicksee)

What is this if not the false empathy of the *apparatchik* caught up in the bureaucratic inertia at the heart of the Nakba. Though Israel expelled nearly 1-million of its Palestinian residents during Nakba, it made sure the machinery that enabled this expulsion remained in place

afterward. The State used it to enforce and render permanent the expropriation by declaring property—whether homes or books—“abandoned” and so freely available to be taken.

This further strengthens the call for BDS despite cries of protest from Israeli academics that academic and cultural institutions should be exempt. If Israel’s National Library, and by extension the Hebrew University, can become accomplices to Nakba, how can we ignore the role that Israel’s universities and librarians play in this evil system?

The Economist [published](#) a heartbreaking account of the looting of the personal library of Palestinian scholar, Khalil al-Sakakini and quotes his diaries on the subject:

“Farewell my library! Farewell mansion of wisdom, temple of philosophers, institute of science, council house of literature!

Farewell, my books! How much midnight oil did I burn with you...Were you transferred, with due respect, to a private or public library? Or did you find your way to the grocer, your pages wrapping onions?”

The article is based on a documentary about the library looting, [The Great Book Robbery](#).

An Israeli commenter on my Facebook page summoned the perfect phrase from Jewish tradition for this noxious, immoral system. In the [Book of Kings](#), the Samarian king Ahab seeks to take the vineyard of Naboth which abuts his palace and turn it into a vegetable garden. But Naboth will not sell it because he inherited it from his own father.

Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, concocts a story accusing Naboth of cursing the king and God and has him stoned to death. As a result of the death, the man’s property becomes that of the king’s. So Ahab gets his vineyard after all. But not before God tells Elijah, the prophet and troublemaker, to admonish the king for his wife’s murderous act. Elijah says to Ahab about the execution of Nabot:

Have you both murdered and inherited [his property]?

A looser rendering would be: “how is it that you can both murder him *and* steal his inheritance?” The Hebrew word “inherited” is clearly meant ironically as it was *Nabot* who inherited the vineyard from his father, while Ahab stole it.

In perfectly parallel ways, Israel has coveted the goods and possessions of the Palestinians who it expelled. Once it had forcibly removed them, it became convenient to take possession. Once Israel had the property, it became accustomed to the pleasures they offered and it would not return them even if it could.

There is of course an even more compelling motive for refusing to return the stolen Palestinian patrimony. Once you establish a precedent by returning the property, you have conceded you had no right to it in the first place since it belonged to others. You can easily extrapolate from books to homes to villages. Before you know it, Israel will be dragged to the Hague or some other God-forsaken place and told to return everything it stole. Lord knows, we wouldn’t want that to happen. Now, would we?

A powerful irony in the original story when compared to the Nakba is that Elijah's furious rebuke actually frightens Ahab to repent for the perfidious act of his wife. He tears his clothing and dons sackcloth to properly mourn for the bad deed, which causes God to partially cancel the curse he had declared against Ahab and his family. Latter-day Israel has ignored all the Elijahs who have inveighed against Nakba and Occupation. Israel's Ahab's have gone on their merry way and enjoyed the fruits of the vineyards they've stolen with a clear conscience.

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