Where Freedom Is:

A Reflection On the Turmoils Of National Liberation

One could say –without raising too many eyebrows- that Palestinians are divided into those that live at home under captivity of some sort, and those who live in freedom of some sort abroad or in exile. But one could also say –now more challengingly, and using a language Tagore may have understood- Palestinians are divided into those who live in freedom, whether under captivity or in exile, and those who are captive, whether living at home or abroad, in exile.[i]

The interesting point to observe here is that these categorizations have little to do with existing political parameters –that is, with the binoculars with which observers have been trained to see the region: whether the Palestinians being referred to happen to hold Israeli citizenship, or Palestinian residence permits in the so-called Palestinian Authority (PA) areas, or citizenships of foreign countries, or no citizenships at all. For

example, I, "living at home", as a Palestinian Jerusalemite, hold no citizenship whatsoever.[ii] I live under captivity, to be sure –that being Israel's dominion, or what we are trained to refer to as "the occupation"- an expression which, by the way, and after forty four years, clearly has nothing to do with the meaning one normally associates with the term "occupied" which one comes across in, for example, public lavatories, where the time scale for vacating the said premises is usually quite limited, with no expectation of any settlements being left behind. I live, as I say, under captivity. But even so I am not sure whether I would consider myself to be captive. Paradoxically, I would not necessarily consider myself to be more captive than a Jewish counterpart, living in Jerusalem, who happens to hold an Israeli citizenship, participates in Israel's elections, and feels completely "at home" in his surrounding Jewish environment. Such a counterpart may be captive in any number of ways, including, most significantly- I wish to argue- to beliefs and ideologies that have come to possess him, and to a predefined political or divine program with which he feels he has to comply.

Elsewhere, I have called such larger-than-life make-belief cages of the mind "macro-biological entities" that come to define one's identity –what one comes to feel what being Jewish is, or what being a Muslim is, or even what being a Zionist or a nationalist is –all at the expense of just being oneself.[iii] Using Tagore's way of describing a person confined in such a manner, as expressed in the words of his nationalist revolutionary leader Sandip, the "image" such a worshipper may have of his country "will do duty for the truth".[iv] Indeed, for Sandip, there *is* no objective truth in the first place, and it is enough if the people he wishes to mobilize in order to rise against the occupier are made to *believe* their country is a goddess above all others. Having become possessed of such a status, much can then be done in its name that would normally fail the most elementary moral scrutiny. Throughout the novel Sandip lists such horrific desires and actions as he thinks come to seem eminently justifiable in the circumstances.[v] Casting a look back on the region where I come from, whether our focus is on the so-called occupiers, or on the so-called occupied, such prisoners of the mind, sad to say, are plentiful.

In each case -whether on the Jewish, or on the Palestinian side- the captors are master illusionists, inducing their prisoners to believe them to be their objects of choice, and of desire, as I shall try to explain.

On the other side of the pole in Tagore's novel stands the raja –a being half attached to this material world, but whose other half seems to be already living in the world of the spirit. Tagore has him at one crucial juncture in the story –when he has decided to let go of his Bimala- breaking before his Master into an unsolicited soliloquy: "Freedom", he proclaims,[vi] "is the biggest thing". "We read …our desires are bonds…but such words, by themselves, are empty. *It is only when we get to the point of letting the bird out of its cage that we can realize how free the bird has set us. Whatever we cage, shackles us with desire whose bonds are stronger than those of iron chains…*this is what the world has failed to understand. They all seek to reform something outside themselves. But reform is wanted only in one's own desires, nowhere else…" "We think" he adds, "that we are our own masters when we get in our hands the object of our

desire –but we are really our own masters only when we are able to cast our desires from our minds".

Bimala, of course -that precious beauty veiled behind the *zenana*- is the beloved country become deified, and in the process, therefore, defiled. It is important to note straightaway that, like Sandip, also Nikhil is under no illusion as to who Bimala really is.[vii] But what he suddenly realizes in letting go of her is that he himself becomes free. Tagore does not portray the solitary, self-abnegating Nikhil, the Maharaja, in the same light as that with which the Genevese intellectual Amiel, author of the *Journal*- curiously one of the books we are led to understand the Maharaja is reading as events in the story unfold- describes himself.[viii] Certainly, some of Amiel's introspective philosophical ruminations –his at once celebration of the centrality of the individual, alongside his own self-denial, humility, and low self-esteem; his emphasis on the subjectivity of freedom as a formula of self-sovereignty, alongside his total submission to an almost pantheistic, spiritual sovereignty- all these find an echo in Nikhil's personality.

"Submission, then, is not defeat; on the contrary, it is strength"[ix]. We can almost hear Nikhil's voice in Amiel's words. Both of them also, for different reasons –Amiel because of being thought to have not risen to the scholarly heights expected of him, and Nikhil because of his stance over the boycott of British goods – also feel renounced by their respective communities –the Maharaja even beginning to be called a traitor by his tenants and countrymen. But here, the comparison ends. The reflective life of Amiel is self-demarcating –the final reflections in his diary (in April 1881) being shortly followed by his solitary death. Nikhil, in contrast, is fully immersed in the life and politics of his community, once suffering to adopt, for a nationalist principle, a losing banking enterprise, and another time suffering the wrath of his countrymen for opposing, on economic grounds, the nationalist policy of boycotting British goods (the *swadeshi* campaign). Indeed, the reflective Nikhil's engagement with the material world ends up in getting himself killed (or so we are led to suspect) as he tries to put a stop to the sectarian (Hindu-Muslim) violence unleashed

when the nationalist uprising begins to turn inwards unto itself –an end that the nationalist leader himself significantly escapes. This remarkable descent –or is it just a transposition?- from the spiritual to the material in this, and other scenes, is, then, one distinctive feature of the man whose self-abnegation leads him to declare to his wife that he would have her be free of him since, whatever pain he may suffer doing so, he would suffer even more if he felt he had her chained inside a cage.

In submission, there is strength. But there is more to this extraordinary commingling between the two parallel worlds of the reflective and of the active: it is *"what the world has failed to understand"*, Nikhil tells his master. *"Whatever we cage, shackles us with desire whose bonds are stronger than those of iron chains."* Nikhil's shocking revelation about freedom –for him, discovered in the decision to let go- is that *knowing* what it is to be free requires that one *become* free, or that such knowledge can only be experiential. Only under such circumstances –once, that is, we set the bird free- do we become aware of

the paradoxical truth that it is our captive that has all along been our jailer! But setting the bird free means casting our desire from our minds –an act, curiously, which carries two contrary meanings: for it can either be a straightforward act of will –when we are under no illusion that we are captive to our object of desire; or it can be an act of submitting to what we take to be a contrary and an external will, believing we are not captives to, but are masters of this object of desire. It is typically in this latter kind of case –when our captors are master illusionists- that our personal identities happen to become nothing but instantiations of macro-biological entities larger than ourselves, dictating to us what we do and think, but making us believe all along that these thoughts and actions are our own.

In one of his amusing stories Tagore helps us understand what it means to knowingly submit our wills to a fictitious being when the people in a village used to being ruled by their elderly but dying leader plead with him in their panicked state to stay on after his death to continue guiding them.[x] He obliges, and his ghost thereafter stays on to lay down the rules

that determine how they should live, until the people slowly begin to feel these rules are too outdated and restrictive, and they once again plead with the ghost to leave them, which he agrees to do, allowing them thus to be free of a master of their own making.

But if this self-made state of imprisonment is more common (we often know we are the cause of what we end up being addicted to), the second kind of self-made imprisonment is more sinister, because we come to believe in the *naturalness* of our condition, as when we take the ghost whose orders we follow to be an independently-existing being that embodies the soul of the collective identity of the people, in identifying with which each of them can experience self-fufillment, or self-realization. In this kind of situation, any attempt at severing the link between the 'ghost' and the individual/s comes down to being seen as an act of identity-murder, as when a national group, for example, is denied self-determination by an occupier, or a labor-union is denied recognition by an authority. Or, returning to Nikhil's love of Bimala, as when the being in love seems so natural, so much an

aspect or an extension of one's own soul or one's own identity, that severing the link between the lovers is unthinkable, and is felt by them to be like the passing of a death-sentence to them both. It is precisely in this kind of condition that Nikhil decides to let go, and in letting go experiences what being truly free really means!

It is paradoxically and challengingly this kind of cage –we can understand Tagore as telling us- in which can be found such core desires as that which a Jew might have in his or her obsession to build an exclusively Jewish State, and/or to dislodge me from my land or my city; or, equally, a Palestinian might have in his or her bent on destroying the State of Israel, or on extracting a UN recognition of a Palestinian State defined by the 1949 Armistice lines, or being today caught up in a boycott campaign of everything Israeli: the protagonists (Israeli or Palestinian) might believe that it is precisely in the fulfillment of these objects of desire (respectively) as *political ends* that their freedom consists. But it is precisely these core objects of desire, Tagore as much as tells us, which shackle us

with bonds stronger than iron chains, and freeing oneself of which one truly becomes free! While not being inherent or intrinsic, such objects of desire nonetheless become so enmeshed in one's view of one's personal identity, of the paradigm one comes to develop of one's self-realization, that one dreads even to consider letting go of even a part of them, and comes to view as an existential enemy any party or person that is seen as standing in the way of their attainment. Disowning them – unlike requesting the ghost to leave- becomes tantamount to disowning oneself, or disowning one's tribe or nation. And to imagine the tribe or nation can disown them is to consider or imagine such a tribe or nation to be capable of committing national identity-suicide.[xi]

But observe what lies behind the paradox: subjective freedom being as just articulated, the callousness of Sandip makes him out to be free: true, not free as or in the sense that Nikhil is, but free in knowing that it is the *idea* that is supreme, and that men must come to be induced to serve it. "*..the coloring of ideas which man gives himself is only superficial.*

The inner man remains as ordinary as ever. If someone, who could see right into me, were to write my biography, he would make me out to be no different....even from Nikhil".[xii] In his Machievellian callousness, Sandip is himself therefore free, or is not captive to the idea he markets in the way Bimala, for example becomes -a fact that surfaces throughout the story, but particularly in his clear covetousness of Bimala's gold. But if Sandip is free in the sense that he already knows his captor to be an idea of his making, and Nikhil is free in the sense that he is capable of disavowing his object of desire, and in his self-abnegation, our very basic problem, as Jews and Palestinians, is that, innocent and well-meaning as Bimala, or as Sandip's young recruit Amulya[xiii] we as normal people are neither self-abnegating nor so callous. We really do cultivate very strong beliefs in the ideas we come to have, such as the fulfillment of God's design, or the absolute righteousness of our national cause, on whichever side of the national divide we happen to be, so much so that casting these ideas from our minds really does come to appear as amounting to a total submission of

our wills, or to capitulation, even treason, straight and simple.

As mentioned above, such one such act of submission for Palestinians today would be to let go of the notion of an independent Palestinian State, and simply to forfeit any demand for it, demanding civil rights within Israel instead, or simply accepting whatever Israel offers them. Another such act is simply to forfeit the right of return, either demanding forthwith full compensation for properties and disrupted lives instead, or even more stunningly, demanding nothing in return. Likewise, one such act of submission for Israelis is to let go of the notion of a Jewish State, or of the notion of the myth of Israel's Immaculate Conception, and to declare an open-door policy for all Palestinian refugees who wish to return, with a full readiness for compensation for destroyed and confiscated properties, offered with a national apology for past wrongs, and an offer for a new life in a democratic bi-national State. Or, Israel or Israelis could simply forfeit Zionism as an ideology, declaring the willingness to become part of a larger Arab World. In other words,

each side could renounce its belief that the peoples' redemption could be brought about by political means. In each such case, the enunciation of such unorthodox views would amount to an act of expungement of ideas that up to the last minute posed as objects of choice, when the reality is that these so-called objects have really become subjects, somehow having surreptitiously mutated and developed a macro-biological life of their own, and become the captors of the individuals harboring them, or -perhaps more appropriately- of the individuals who have simply become their hosts.

Naturally, a person who is captive as explained will deny with ferocious conviction that they are in that state, claiming on the contrary that it is precisely in the pursuit of their convictions that they are free, or that they will achieve their state of freedom. They will reject outright therefore any suggestion of submission, regarding it as a sign of weakness and capitulation, and even as an act of treason. How can it not be so, when one's own identity has so become shaped by those ideas that expunging them becomes tantamount to

rejecting one's self, or to committing identity suicide? The dreaded task may even seem more forbidding when, being strongly affiliated with a larger community, the identity self-suicide being contemplated comes to be seen by the person concerned as being a death being brought upon the entire tribe, and not just upon herself.

It is in this sense Palestinians feel they cannot disavow or let go of the idea of a Palestinian nation-State, or cannot envision realizing their true identity through a nationally-pluralistic political system. It is also in this context that many peace-loving and well-meaning Jews today dread the rejection of the idea of a Jewish State, or of Zionism.[xiv] In their minds, the idea –as an abstract expression of all that is beautiful about Jewish history and culture, and as a chord seeking its rightful place in the universal human symphony- dominates and defines how they view themselves. They may see some blemishes in their image of themselves –phases of Jewish history or of Zionism that are not so bright or perfect- but they could continue in spite of those blemishes to hold on to the idea of a Jewish State or of

Zionism, believing nonetheless that the good side far outshines the bad. In particular, a fair two-state solution with the Palestinians, both as a closure of the conflict with their neighbors and as a stepping stone for a peaceful future in the region would seem to them to be a necessary and sufficient formula for giving political expression to this cherished idea with which they identify. Would that were so!

But the very same idea of a Jewish State (or of Zionism) may seem different to less well-meaning Jews, who, either Sandip-like promulgate illusions of supremacy that justify robbery and exclusivist values, or Amulya-like naively come to believe in those illusions, submitting themselves entirely to them.

Two ideas, then, of the Jewish State seem to exist. As a non-Jew, and an interested 'third party' who happens to be existentially affected by what that idea is, I may now ask, which of the two meanings of the idea of a Jewish State or of Zionism should I take to be the correct one? Surely, it wouldn't make sense for my quest to be that of a disengaged metaphysician. The only way I could be

expected to reach a reasonable answer is by judging the said State's deeds towards me, and if I find that what is being manifested on the ground expresses the second of the two senses of the said idea, then I would surely be justified in coming to view that idea in a negative light, and I would only be doing what is right in declaring this to be the case. Naturally, I wouldn't feel I needed to make a choice on this issue if, defining itself as a Jewish State, Israel also defined once and for all its eastern borders as those falling along the 49 Armistice lines, instituted as basic laws its equal treatment of its non-Jewish citizens both as individuals and as a community, and declared its readiness to address the refugee problem in a fair and just manner (understandably, not so as to deluge its own population with a larger number of non-Jews). Otherwise, I wouldn't be off the mark if I felt that a surgical expungement of the idea is clearly needed for bringing peace between the neighbors.

The idea of a Palestinian, a Muslim or an Arab State, in my view warrants the same analysis: if the prevailing –i.e., actualized- idea of a

Palestinian State is that of a bellicose, deceitful, corrupt, undemocratic and divisive political system, then it is surely far worthier to expunge the idea of the nation-State altogether, opting for whatever alternative system that might truly cater for the true well-being, freedom and dignity of the individual and the community. In both cases, I believe the real question that must be asked is: What is a Jewish or a Palestinian State really worth, especially to Jews, and to Palestinians respectively? What are they both for? What are the values they -not only profess, but those that they actually implement on the ground, or seem intent on so doing? Are they values, irrespective of names, normal Palestinians and Israelis, or normal human beings, would really like to live by? Needless to say, the same applies to what an Arab or a Muslim State stands for, especially after the recent upheavals in the Arab world: if such States mean Coptic-Muslim warfare as in Egypt, or Sunni-Shi'ite violence as in Bahrain or Iraq, or Sunni-Alawite confrontation as in Syria, or Christian emigration or secessions as respectively in Iraq or the Sudan,[xv] then so much the worse for all these state systems. To

my mind, they should be rejected and ostracized with as much conviction and vehemence as a bellicose and apartheid Jewish State, and a new search must be made for that political order which can truly be attuned to human needs, including of course the celebration of the bright aspects of ethnic, religious or regional cultural values. But such celebration should at no time be made at the expense of those universal human values whose ultimate reality-check is the individual's psychological, social and economic well-being –not specifically and only as a member of that race or religion, but as a human being pure and simple.

Tagore's own sense of what is more important –the humanism that unites mankind or the differences defined by the galaxy of mankind's domestic walls is in no doubt: indeed, if there is one major point of disagreement between him and that other Indian giant, Ghandi, it can perhaps be articulated by invoking the question of *whether* national emancipation is a necessary step for human emancipation. But in a rare congruence of views on the matter as this

related specifically to the Zionist project, both Ghandi and Tagore saw the Jewish struggle to build an exclusivist nation-state for themselves a misguided endevour, Ghandi believing it to be so both in method as well as in purpose, the true Zion lying in the heart of the human being rather than in a geographic spot as in Palestine. In contrast, Tagore's own reflections in 1930 on the Zionist project –and which, unlike Ghandi's case, drew him hardly any fire from Jewish spokesmen-[xvi] both conceded a historical/geographic Jewish claim to Palestine while declining the projected Jewish nation-state as a requisite for the reviving of Jewish culture:[xvii] *"I visualize a Palestine Commonwealth in which the Arabs will live their own religious life and the Jews will revive their resplendent culture, but both will be united as one political and economic entity"*. And, later, *"Come to your co-Palestinians in a free spirit and tell them: 'You and we are both old races. We are both stubborn races. You cannot subdue us, and we will not try to change you. But we can both be ourselves, retain our identity and still be united in the political aims of Palestine, the Commonwealth of Jews and Arabs'"*.

One might at first find the contrasting views of the Mahatma and Tagore bewildering, the spiritually-inclined latter seeming to be more accommodating to the political desires of the Jewish people than the politically-inclined former. But the bewilderment immediately disappears once one reminds oneself that it is precisely from a *political* perspective that Ghandi opposed the establishment of a Jewish nation-state, believing this at the end of the day to be just another imperialist project, while it was from a *spiritualist* perspective that Tagore condoned a non-political Zionism, or a Zionism that, as he rhetorically asked his Jewish interviewer, could be such that its proponents could '*manage to be Jews and Palestinians at the same time*'.[xviii]

The insights of both Tagore and Ghandi that they brought into the Jewish debate –which, in the case of Ghandi at least, infuriated many Jewish spokesmen at the time- were in no doubt inspired by India's long experience of her immensely rich blend of different customs, languages and nations. Their lasting relevance is attested to by the continuing failure to

transcend that initial moment of Israel's birth, and to bring about a new dynamic of regional harmony rooted in an agreement of peace. In this regard, it may be significant to point out yet another major Indian policy position expressed during that period, shortly after India became independent, this time at the United Nations and orchestrated by India's third major figure of the period, Nehru: rather than going along with the partition recommendation of the other eight member states in the special committee enjoined by the United Nations (UNSCOP) to report on the situation in Palestine (September 3, 1947), India, joined by Yugoslavia and Iran, produced as a better alternative a *federal* solution in what came to be called 'the Minority Report'. Much of the reasoning in that report reflects, at various levels, what might be recognized as insights already expressed by Tagore and Ghandi –and, in the special context of a looming dead-lock in the current negotiations, as insights that might be even more relevant today than ever before. In effect, they are insights that were also shared by the major Jewish figures of the time, some of whom Tagore was in touch with, notably

Martin Buber and Jehudah Magnus, the Hebrew University's first President.

This leads us directly to reflect on the current state of affairs in Palestine, 63 years after Israel's establishment on 78% of Palestinian territory, 44 years after Israel's occupation of the remaining 22%, and 18 years after negotiations for a two-state solution between the Israeli Government and the PLO began. How might one assess our 'human condition' in this region after all these years: have the national projects of either side –our countries- brought us any closer to that 'heaven of freedom', "*where the mind is without fear, and the head is held high; where knowledge is free; where the world has not been broken into fragments by narrow domestic walls; where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary sand of dead habit*"? Or have we instead burrowed ever deeper into our respective cocoons, sinking more firmly into our domestic prisons with ever more narrowing walls, unable anymore to reason freely at all?

In his latest speech to the UN[xix], Netanyahu disavows any intent of incorporating Palestinians now living in the so-called PA areas (Arab population centers in which autonomy is ceded to the Palestinian Authority) as citizens of Israel, nor even –he cleverly adds- *as subjects*. It is his reference to the term "subjects" that is curious. He clearly means that Israel will not consider even giving civil rights to these Palestinians who live under her dominion –a step I suggested elsewhere Israel might take –even as a temporary measure, and until an agreed-upon political settlement is found.[xx] In a telling enactment of this exclusionary (some would call it for what it is, namely, racist) policy, Israel's High Court more recently upheld Israel's Citizenship Law, rejecting a petition from 2003 to make that Law allow Palestinians who marry Israeli citizens to apply for Israeli citizenship. Amending the Law in that way, the High Court said in explanation of its ruling, would be tantamount to 'national suicide', referring to the demographic 'danger' to Israel's Jewish majority if Palestinians (from the PA areas) were to acquire Israeli citizenship in that way,

or by marriage![xxi] So irreversibly sealed has the definition of Zionism as a preponderantly *Jewish* State become that a 'captive' Supreme Court Judge does not in the least seem perturbed even as this definition begins to jar with human values to pronounce that this racist definition must be protected by law, as otherwise the doors will become wide open for a national suicide –meaning the submergence of the Jewish population within an ever-growing Palestinian one!! So, should Palestinians from Israel wish to marry Palestinians from the so-called 'occupied' territories, they should count on leaving the country altogether (or on living apart from their spouses).[xxii] The signs are even less clear that the Israeli Government is about to make the necessary concessions for the Palestinians to allow them to establish their State. Indeed, given the restrictive conditions Netanyahu enumerates which have to do with Israel's security and its history, the State he has in mind to offer the Palestinians will clearly be not much more than a Bantustan. It will not, in other words, be a State the Palestinian leadership can bring itself to accept –or which, even if it accepts it, it could muster the public

support behind it necessary for this becoming a lasting peace. In practical terms, therefore, and assuming that Israel's policy will be defined for the next few years by the aforesaid parameters, the situation will be one where Palestinians will continue to be suspended between neither being granted even basic civil rights in Israel, nor being freed of its Army to be able to establish their own State independently of Israel. In other words, the best that could be hoped for during the next phase, and while even more potential state-territory will be being swallowed by Israeli settlers, will most likely be conflict-containment. However, the Israeli authorities will have to muster such an ever-growing arsenal of racist laws in order to put the lid down on growing frustrations and denials of basic civil rights that Israel will in no time become an intolerable jail for its very makers.

On his part, Mahmoud Abbas and *Fatah*, the party he represents, are both quickly becoming redundant. If they are unable to bring about the independence they promised, and if the people's quotidian needs are being fulfilled through an efficient administrative system that

is fully funded by the international community with both American and Israeli blessings,[xxiii] then *Fatah* will simply cease to have any function, and any reason for it to exist. The *political* vacuum being left behind, on the other hand, is in any case quickly being filled –for whatever that is worth- by *Fatah's* rival, *Hamas.* This party can continue to attract the support of the people –not for the achievement of a realizable political vision, but for the professing of puritanical principles that can be held on to in the absence of an acceptable political settlement. Paradoxically, *Hamas* would be better placed than *Fatah* as an implicit potential partner with Israel in a conflict-containing, no-war/no peace *modus vivendi,* where neither need principles be forsaken for a compromise, nor maintaining power need be risked by a military showdown. Israel could certainly live with a 'boogey' along its borders whose presence is sufficient to maintain vigilance within, and support and sympathy from without, while not posing any real threat and causing only minimum damage.

But what kind of life would people have in such a future? Imagine two opposed

ideological masses living at each others' doorsteps, each with an exclusive claim to a territory's history as well as geography, each seething with disdain for the other, each competing to further entrench this claim to exclusivity - perhaps even to superiority- among its members, and each seeking incrementally to expand its size, increasing the pressure of its weight as it does this on the other: what kind of life would the people constituting these masses have?

In one respect –that of how each side sees its predestined or predetermined religious or national role in this spot of the earth- people may feel self-fulfilled: but it would be self-fulfillment inside a shrinking cage that leaves less and less air to breathe or space to move. Inevitably, in the circumstances, the increased pressure will cause disruptions in the human security and social orders –both justifications for the existence of a State as a political organism whose purpose is to uphold these. And once the function falls by the wayside, so will its instrument, the State, as this also ceases to have any further use or relevance. The State, in other words, will find itself

slipping into a loop leading to inevitable collapse.

While the above are not Tagore's words, yet they convey Tagore's basic message that it is not politics that holds highest place in human affairs, but human values –which are, by definition, not values that are the peculiar properties or defining features of one race or religion, but which are universal. In a sense, Tagore's message (the converse, it must be stressed, of that of many other prominent thinkers, from Aristotle to Ghandi) was that it is morality that is above politics. In real terms, what this translates into is that a political order that does not proffer the space for a moral life for its citizens or subjects is, not only the *wrong* kind of order: it is more importantly doomed to self-annihilation or collapse. Tagore already saw this when he spoke in favor of a *cultural* rather than a *political* Zionism. But today, more than ever in Israel's history, this trajectory towards implosion and collapse may seem much clearer, and much more imminent. The theoretical and immediate way out, of course, is either to make Israel's 'domestic walls' Israel's outer limit, so that its

neighbors on the other side could enjoy living in freedom in their own sovereign State; or- having extended these walls so as to incorporate these neighbors into its domain- to extend equal rights to them. But neither path, sadly, today seems a realistic option.

So, What else is there? Assuming that neither of the two preceding options is realistic, what else can we hope for? Can we see a way forward in the midst of what otherwise seems like a very gloomy prospect?

Let us here define our question more carefully: Assuming that what the future holds is 'more of the same' –meaning, continued Israeli hegemony over the geo-political space of the Palestinians, continued growth in the number of settlements and settlers, intermittent breakouts of violent and non-violent flare-ups, mounting pressure and tension caused by the decreased breathing space on the various social, diplomatic and political fronts, etc.- could a time be reached when people (Israelis as well as Palestinians) might begin to discern a light of hope outlining a path towards a different reality, one which both sides at that

time might find both reasonable and appealing?

In a compressed geo-political space of nearly 27,000 sq.km., formerly a mandate of the British, there now live just over 10 million Jews and Arabs (Muslim, Druze and Christian), divided almost equally, but living mostly in separate regions/cities, half a million of whom, as Jewish settlers, now live across what was the Armistice Line dividing Israel from the West Bank. While there is and was a political reason behind the thinking to partition that space, there have been and still remain many other basic reasons (geographic, economic, etc., but also 'moral') why that space should remain undivided, its resources to be shared equally and across the board by all. Three major sources of common 'national' wealth could be mentioned in this context as examples of what is meant by a 'national' source of wealth whose sharing is incumbent both geo-economically and morally: water, offshore gas and religious tourism. Not only is there a moral argument for why these resources should be shared by the two peoples inhabiting the land: there is a clear economic

advantage for why this should be so, benefits that are spread more widely being more conducive for further economic growth. There is, then, a clear benefit to all inhabitants in the creation of an open economic space. But, given the continuing desire by the two populations to remain separate, the impossibility of a radical partition (a hypothesis we began with), and the geo-economic reasons favoring cohesion, what remains as a reasonable way out may be (recalling the Minority Report) a federal system half-way in its structure between the European Union and the United States. Minding a few provisions to be mentioned below, such a system could be constituted by, on one side, an archipelago of predominantly Jewish regions, calling itself "the Jewish State"; and on the other –again mindless of present-day unofficial demarcation of borders- an archipelago of predominantly Palestinian regions, calling itself "the democratic state of Palestine". Shared regions, such as Jerusalem, could have shared governments. Palestinian refugees from some areas within present-day Israel and wishing to return could conceivably find it possible under the new arrangement and

the new demarcation of borders to return to the future Palestinian State. Such an arrangement may be better suited to the parties concerned than any other scenario, having points of attraction even for some shades of Palestinian hard-line positions (on the question of return), as well as for some shades of hard-line Israeli positions (on the question of settlements)[xxiv]; and it could be a more sensible kind of partition than both a historically-based or a clinically clean separation between two independent States. Furthermore, by establishing a semblance of separateness for each of the two states, Jews (as well as Arabs) would be able to maintain a separate politico-cultural 'home' for themselves, providing sufficient space for all the conceivable internal interactions that a people or a nation may feel desirable or necessary for safeguarding and developing their respective national and cultural characteristics. In such a space, needless to say, there would be no territorial lines preventing the free flow of people, goods and services, and citizens of each state would be able to relate to the entire country as a shared historic home.

Clearly, just as with other scenarios, an appropriate road map would need to be devised in order to reach that end-point. For this road map to succeed where previous ones have failed, it needs by necessity to be drawn up and controlled by Israel itself, and Israel alone. And for this to be the case, Israel has to have reached the point of having become fully convinced of the nature of the end-game, and of its own existential interest in it. Assuming this to be the case (that the two sides have reached the point where they come to realize they need an exit strategy from what will more and more look like an undesirable outcome) let me point out some landmarks that need to lie on that road map: first, the present-day Palestinian Authority should be allowed to continue its growth, both horizontally in terms of its reach to other areas in the West Bank, as well as vertically in terms of the depth of this reach –i.e., its prerogatives. This is in order to prepare it to assume its final role as the government of a State. Second, there should be a concerted effort to raise the general standard and quality of living of Palestinians living in the Palestinian Authority areas as to reach that enjoyed by Israeli Palestinians. This is to

ensure that Israeli Palestinians do not feel they stand to lose from becoming Palestinian citizens, when the end-point has been reached. Third, a process of the lifting of restrictions on Palestinians living in the Palestinian Authority areas should be embarked upon, this to be extended so as to include full access to all civic services (so-called 'civil rights') offered by the State of Israel to its citizens, short of political rights, which will remain affixed to the Palestinian Authority. This is to ensure, among other matters, that the process of creation of a shared open space can be gradually engineered so as to take account of all possible mishaps along the way. Fourth, a governance-sharing regime for Jerusalem could be immediately instituted, serving as an experiment and a model for the sought-after federal system of government throughout the land: accordingly, three separate governing structures could be established, two to run the affairs of the Jewish and Arab populations respectively, and a third to run those matters that are of joint concern. This 'landmark' would be of special importance because the Arabs of Jerusalem enjoy civil but not political rights within Israel. Assuming that their

political affiliation becomes affixed to the Palestinian Authority, then similar arrangements in mixed townships in the context of the end-game become easier to be made elsewhere, such as in Nazareth or Haifa.

Of course, having said that such an outcome should be *embraced* (rather than just accepted) by Israel, it stands to reason that Israel would at all stages of the process be expected to remain in the pilot seat, in particular as regards both security as well as matters of foreign affairs. Failing this provision, Israel would not find the arrangement appealing in the first place, and it is by force of circumstance or by happenstance that Israel needs to lead the whole process. As for the Palestinians, the very nature of a clearly beneficent strategy being implemented by Israel would elicit a positive response at the level of the ordinary individuals, forcing representative leaderships to follow along.

Reaching a federal end-game of the sort described above would account for a soft rather than a hard nationalism, a nationalism

that remains close to human values rather than one that discards them, and for a nationalism that would cater for free citizens rather than one that would treat its members as instruments. In reaching out for such an end-point, if Palestinians can learn and have learnt-a lot from Ghandi, both Palestinians and Israelis can clearly still learn a lot from Tagore and his philosophy of freedom as a humanistic need to which politics must come in second place.

Sari Nusseibeh

(On the occasion of a seminar on Tagore's *The Home And the World* organized by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, November 2011).

---

[i] Tagore's celebration of freedom as a humanistic cosmopolitanism transcending the boundaries of cultures, nations or religions – "*where knowledge is free; where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls*"- was recognized as soon as his first collection of poems (Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (London: Macmillan, 1913) was published in Britian, with an intorudcution by W.B.Yeats. Not only did 'being free' not necessarily mean, therefore, achieving national freedom; more significantly, for him it meant being free *from* nationalism. It is over this issue that Tagore and Ghandi are set apart in their philosophies, the latter beleving that the path towards freedom from nationalism having to go through national freedom. I shall return to this theme in the main body of this text.

[ii] Palestinians in what is referred to as "the West Bank" (of the Jordan river), an area which also included East Jerusalem, and which fell under Israeli occupation in 1967, held Jordanian citizenship until 1988, when Jordan decided to annul this citizenship in the context of the Palestinian struggle for an indpendent Palestinian State. When the 'Oslo Agreement' between the PLO and Israel was signed in 1993, leaving the question of Jerusalem undetermined and deferred to 'the final stage', Palestinians both in the West Bank and in Gaza (which had been under Egyptian custodianship until the occupation began in 1967) were allowed by this Agreement to acquire Palestinian 'passports', or identity documentations, leaving Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem "passport-less", or without a citizenship document. In theory, since Israel in the meantime had annexed East Jerusalem, these residents could and could

have applied for and acquired Israeli citizenship, but except for a handful, Palestinians in the city have declined this 'option'. At the time of writing, 'PA Areas' refer to Gaza and to Palestinian population centers in the West Bank, which together constitute around 20% of the total land that fell under occupation in 1967.

iii *What's A Palestinian State Worth?* (Harvard University Press, 2011), paperback 2012.

iv All references to Rabindranath Tagore in this presentation are to his *The Home and the World,* at www.gutnberg.org/cache/epub/7166/pg7166.html, accessed on 10/23/2011. In this particular case, see p.68. Referring to Nikhil, Sandip says, "He has such a prejudice in favor of truth- as though there exists an objective reality! How often have I tried to explain to him that where untruth truly exists, there it is indeed the truth. This was understood in our country in the old days, and so they had the courage to declare that for those of little understanding untruth is the truth. For them, who can truly believe their country to be a goddess, her image will do duty for the truth. With our nature and our traditions we are unable to realize our country as she is, but we can easily bring ourselves to believe in her image.."

v See *ibid.* ,for example, p.41,where Sandip says, "To be just is for the ordinary men – it is reserved for the great to be unjust". And, later, "All the world-conquerors, from Alexander down to the American Millionaires, mould themselves into a sword or into a mint, and thus find that distinct image of themselves which is the source of their success". On the whole, Sandip argues that deep within, he is just as ordinary as Nikhil. But to fulfill the destiny of leading a country, he has to dispossess himself (and his country's acts) of whatever keeps them both unfulfilled or servile.

vi *Ibid* p.77

vii In other words, like Sandip, Nikhil also sees Bimala as what she really is, namely, an innocent, home-bound, 'country-girl' and housewife, totally engulfed by traditional beliefs and habits, but harboring within her all the beauty and magic of a pristine India, untouched, unspoiled, and pure –but not a goddess, and not the less for being a woman. Nikhil also wanted her to experience the outside world, and to love him having been exposed to it, rather than be in love with him or to appreciate him for want of knowledge.

viii Henri-Frederic Amiel, *Journal Intime*. The references in this paper are to the English translation *Private Journal* by Mary Arnold -Mrs Humphrey Ward- (MacMillan & Co., 1901). It is not every day that one finds references to Amiel, and the book's mention by Tagore is therefore worthy of attention. There are two observations to make here. The first has to do with Amiel himself, whose diary contains a strong critique of the then-evolving school of thought in the West associated with the call for democracy, especially as it was beginning to manifest itself in North America as a call for equality. Amiel's (almost libertarian) critique is based on the belief that democracy (as a system that seeks to eliminate differences between individuals) undermines justice, which he saw as a value that is rooted in individual rather than collective rights. The second observation has to do with Mary Arnold herself (whom Tagore may have met during his trips to the UK), who, besides being an accomplished writer and poet herself, also headed the *anti-suffragette* movement in the UK, believing that most public tasks can only and better be performed by men (it is noteworthy also that she was the grand-daughter of Thomas Arnold, Rugby's famous grandmaster, and the aunt, on the mother's side, of Arnold Huxley). One finds, in both Amiel himself and Mary Ward a deference to the culture

of 'the Englsih gentleman', associated with aristocracy, that is very resonant in Nikhil's own character.

ix *Journal,* 121

x "Kartar Bhoot" ("Ghost of the Leader"). The reference to this story is found in Amartya Sen's "Tagore and His India". Nobelprize.org. 5 Jan 2012, which first appeared in the *New York Review of Books* June 26th 1997.

xi See below, where an Israeli High Court Judge uses this description in his defense of the ruling against Palestinians acquiring Israeli citizenship through marriage.

xii *The Home and the World* p.43.

xiii While Sandip represents the callous leader of a revolution, Amulya represents the young idealist soldier, who is prepared to sacrifice himself for the cause. It is this aspect of his character that draw him to worship Bimala, turning against his master's wishes in doing so, and that makes the latter begin to love him as a brother.

xiv I wish here to recognize Israeli-American Professor and peace activist Samuel Fleischacker for having drawn my attention to the need to make explicit these two notions of what a Jewish State means, rather than leaving the matter to seem as though in my opinion (as, for example, this may be surmised from my article 'Why Israel Cannot Be A Jewish State' in *al-Jazeera* September 2011) such a State must inevitably mean just one of those two. I wish to add here what I have expressed on a number of occasions, namely, that it is my contention that States, ideologies, etc. are of our own making. It is *we* who determine their natures.

xv Reportedly, Iraq's ancient Christian community has decreased dramatically in size over the past decade as a result of emigration caused by war conditions. In the Sudan, the largely Christian south decided also to separate itself from the Muslim north-partly for economic reasons, but presumably also for the lack of a sense of genuine national unity between the two religious communities.

xvi A telling contrast in how they were both viewed can be found in Martin Buber, whose admiration for Tagore as a fellow mystic/philosopher reflected, among other things, Buber's own concern that Zionism not become a 'hard' or 'narrow-hearted' nationalism (see the article by Gary Shapiro "When Albert Einstein Met Rabindranath Tagore" in *Forward* 11/11/2011, on Paul Mendes Flohr's lecture at the Leo Baeck Institute on the 6th October of that year, in which he discusses the relationship of both Einstein and Buber with Tagore). Buber's letter-exchanges with Ghandi, on the other hand (See *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue*, Nahum N. Glatzer and Paul Mendes Flohr eds., Syracuse University Press, 1996) reveal anger at what Buber felt was a total insensitivity on Ghandi's part to the Jewish plight. With regard to Ghandi's opinion that Zion is to be found in the heart, Buber adamantly insisted on recalling the Psalmist's saying (Ps.48:3) that 'Zion is the city of the Great King', meaning it was a *geographic* as well as a spiritual/historic location (see Paul Mendes-Flohr *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity,* Wayne State University Press 1991, p.190). Another major Jewish figure both Tagore and Ghandi had personal relations with was Einstein. Meetings between Tagore and Einstein took place both in Potsdam and Manhattan.

xvii From 'Interview with the Jewish Standard On the Palestinian Problem', in *English Writings of Tagore, Miscellaneous Writings Vol 8*, (tr. and ed., Mohit K.Ray) p. 1284-6. I am grateful to Dr. Gangeya Mukherji for alerting me to this reference.

xviii *Ibid.*

xix On the 23rd September 2011

xx *What is a Palestinian State Worth?*

xxi See the editorial in *Haaretz.com*, Saturday 14th 2012, titled , 'Supreme Court thrusts Israel down the slope of apartheid'.

xxii The growing self-absorption of the Israeli Jewish population especially during the past decade is revealed by a recent survey of "The Beliefs, Observance and Values Among Israeli Jews" by the Israel Democracy Institute's Guttman Center for Surveys and the Avi Chai Foundation (see the report in *Ha'aretz* 28th January 2012). Although the findings were reached in 2009, the results of the survey were only released to the public on the 26th January 2012. Among other findings, the survey shows that 70% of the respondents believe that the Jews are God's chosen people, and that a full 22% define themselves as orthodox or ultra-orthodox, with only 46% defining themselves as secular. 55% believe in the coming of the Messiah, while 37% believe that a non-observant Jew threatens the entire Jewish people. The findings make understandable certain incidents during the past year, for example in towns such as Beit Shemesh, west of Jerusalem, where secular Jews (a school girl, an 11-year old boy of a newly immigrant family from the United States, and a 26-year old woman) all came under physical attack or abuse (in separate incidents). But intra-orthodox tensions (e.g., between Oriental and European stocks) also came to a head last year, when Ashkenazi parents refused to have their children be educated in the same classrooms as Sephardic children. The confrontation spilled out into the streets, with the police intervening in order to separate between the two fighting factions. But it is not only self-absorbed orthodox or religious Israeli Jews who believe Israel must have a preponderantly or even an exclusively Jewish population: almost all surveys reveal that the majority of Israel's Jewish population wish to keep Israel Jewish, demographically as well as religiously. In all, the picture is a grim one of an increasingly self-obsessed and paranoid population where 'tolerance for the other' – even within the same religion or race- is fast-dwindling.

xxiii This is not, however, guaranteed: the American Congress is quite capable of suspending all aid to the Palestinian Authority, especially if this proves to be non-compliant with U.S. wishes –as these are articulated by the Jewish lobby or the Israeli Government. Apprehensive of warnings to that effect by the U.S. Congress, Abu Mazen has recently authorized a law drawn up by Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to institute a new tax system in order to compensate for dwindling aid. However, this move is being resisted by the local private sector, and it is not clear that it will in any case cover the enormous deficit that will result if aid is suddenly withheld. On the other hand, worsening economic conditions for the Palestinians may lead to instability. This could either be unwelcome if the desired objective is containment, or it could be welcomed if Israel plans to aggravate the situation to a degree where it can find justification for taking drastic measures such as population transfers.

xxiv These (settlements and refugees) are two 'sore points' that can potentially obstruct peace endeavors: in Israel, settlers and their supporters have become a major electoral force for any Government to deal with; and among Palestinians, both 'at home' and abroad, the sacrosanct-ness of the dream to return to one's original home, even literally, is likewise another potential obstruction to making peace. A re-drawing of the map in the projected federal system could take at least partial account of both constituencies by incorporating settlements into the Jewish State, and refugees from the Diaspora into regions that are now Israel but would become part of the Palestinian State.