

Beyond Tribal Loyalties

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Personal Stories of Jewish Peace Activists

Edited by

Avigail Abarbanel

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Beyond Tribal Loyalties:
Personal Stories of Jewish Peace Activists
Edited by Avigail Abarbanel

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Photograph of Avigail Abarbanel on page 139 by Sandy Fea. Photograph of Rae Abileah on page 183 by Ben Harris/Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Photograph of Rich Siegel on page 247 by Ge Xiaosen.

*To my late grandmother Rivka,
to Palestinian people everywhere,
and to activists working
for justice and human rights.*

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Foreword

As I write this, the United Nations is about to vote on the recognition of a Palestinian state on pre-1967 borders and institutional membership. Regardless of whether one supports the UN initiative or not—and supporters and detractors can be found among Palestinians, Israelis, Arabs, Americans, Europeans, Jews and others, each for their own reasons—the reality of the event itself is of enormous political and symbolic importance. For it restores the Palestinian issue to a central position internationally—demanding attention and redress—and it does so without violence.

The need to keep the Palestinian issue focal to the Jewish discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a theme that runs through this very important collection of works by Jewish academics, writers and activists who have broken from the mainstream of the Jewish community in their own countries including Israel. Their journeys are individual and profound, some involving considerable struggle while others less so; yet they are all animated by the same set of ethical imperatives that speak to the humanity of the other, an essential humanity, they argue, which must be incorporated within our own moral boundaries and understanding of Jewish history. The imperative is proximity over distance, embrace over exclusion—to maintain a living connection with the people we are oppressing, to enter their predicaments and do what we can to end their subordination and pain; to see Palestinians as we see ourselves—human beings seeking an ordinary life for their children in a home of their own. Only by fighting for their freedom, the authors believe, can we truly secure our own. At its core—to borrow from Professor Marc Ellis—this book calls for reflection not celebration.

Many important and disquieting questions, once silenced, are voiced: Who are we as a people and what should we stand for? Why do so many—indeed the majority among us—so easily and

willingly tolerate the suffering inflicted in our name? What are Jews now capable of resisting? What is our narrative of victory and defeat? What are the boundaries of our rebirth after the Holocaust? Where do we belong?

The tension between Zionism and Judaism inevitably emerges, as it must, around the following challenge: Can Jewish power and sovereignty, and Jewish ethics coexist in the face of our continued oppression of the Palestinian people? Can empowerment and compassion ever be reconciled? Each author in this collection finds his or her own answers and they are not all the same. But they show, poignantly and without equivocation, that our salvation as a people lies in a return to, and renewal of, our ethical tradition.

More than anything, the essays that follow show—and this is crucial—that our identity as a people can move beyond a life made of barriers and as such, we must resolve, as the writers here do, never to leave the world as it is.

Sara Roy
Center for Middle Eastern Studies
Harvard University
September 2011

Introduction

This book owes its existence to my friend Kenneth Ring, the editor of *Letters from Palestine*. In early 2010, not long after my husband Ian and I moved from Canberra, Australia to the Scottish Highlands, Ken contacted me and suggested that I write a book about my journey to becoming an activist for Palestinian rights. He felt that there was something special about my transition from growing up in Israel and serving in the military there, to becoming an activist, and that it was a story worth telling.

Ken is a persistent fellow, so I decided to give it a try and started to write down my story. But soon I began to feel uncomfortable. It just didn't seem right to me to have a book entirely about myself. I knew that I was not *that* special, and that there were other Jews who have been through a similar journey.

One afternoon on the bus home from Inverness, while I was reading Ken's book, I suddenly had an idea. What if instead of writing a book only about myself, I edit a collection of personal stories of Jewish activists? *Letters from Palestine* is an anthology of personal stories of Palestinians. The contributors in *Letters from Palestine*—several generations of Palestinians who have lived in the shadow of the *Nakbah*¹ and of Israeli Occupation—were prepared to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences with the world, and Ken provided the platform. It occurred to me that the same model could also be applied to stories of Jewish activists.

Although I started my activism in what felt like isolation, I discovered over the years that there was a growing community of Jews who had similar thoughts and feelings to my own about Is-

¹ *Nakbah* is Arabic for “catastrophe”. It refers to the deliberate and systematic ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. The *Nakbah* included massacres like the ones in Deir Yassin and Tantura, as well forced expulsions, destruction and appropriation of Palestinian cities, towns, villages and property, by the Israeli forces during and after the war of 1948. The state of Israel is either denying the *Nakbah* or justifying it. To the best of my knowledge it is not mentioned in any Israeli school textbook.

rael and Palestine. They too have been through the challenging personal journey to come out of Zionism. Jesse Bacon, one of the contributors, said to me that this book was creating a community. Editing the book certainly made me feel like a member of a community of like-minded (but not identical-minded!) people. Having my story included with the stories of others felt a lot more authentic than telling it in isolation.

The idea felt right but I also had reservations about this book. My reservations are reflected in Anna Baltzer's regrets about the way she initially approached her activist work. In her piece she says,

I was reinforcing the idea that Jewish voices and opinions are more important than the voices and needs of the oppressed themselves, the Palestinian people, the experts and leaders on their plight and struggle.

In my years of public speaking about Israel-Palestine in Australia, I consciously used the Western bias in favour of Jewish voices. I knew that as a Jew, and especially one who was born in Israel, I was more likely to be listened to than a Palestinian telling exactly the same story. In this book, once again Jewish voices were going to be given a stage, and I was concerned that I was colluding with this bias rather than challenging it. After all, haven't Jewish voices been heard enough? Isn't it now time for more books like *Letters in Palestine*, *A Doctor in Galilee* by Hatim Kanaaneh or *Nakbah: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* edited by Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod? Perhaps we don't need another book of Jewish stories, even if they are supportive of the Palestinians.

But I think that perhaps this book does have a place. The Jewish voice in this book is fundamentally different from the mainstream Zionist and Jewish voice. This is the voice of individuals who were able to transcend something powerful about their upbringing: the requirement to turn Zionist ideology into an inseparable part of their identity, and ensure that they always see them-

selves, the world and Israel in particular, through the perspective of this ideology².

Another reason that I believe this book has a place is because each author, in his or her way, validates the Palestinian narrative. They testify to what the Palestinians themselves have been saying all along. By so doing, their stories might just help the Palestinian voice to be heard better. There is a chance that some people who wouldn't otherwise listen to Palestinians, might be more open to learn about Palestinian history and present reality from Jewish stories.

Another reservation I had is once again echoed in one of Anna Baltzer's regrets,

... as a Jew, I was giving permission to non-Jews—especially Christians otherwise hesitant to speak out due to the Church's history of antisemitism and complicity during the Nazi Holocaust—to criticise Israeli atrocities, when what needed to be said was that non-Jews do not need permission from Jews to do what they know is right. . .

Baltzer is absolutely right of course. Why should non-Jews need permission to speak up for the rights of a persecuted people just because they happen to be victims of the Jewish state? But unfortunately the reality is that they still do.

My husband Ian, who is not Jewish, wrote a letter to the *Canberra Times* a few years ago, protesting against something that Israel did, that was in the news at the time. A swift response followed from a Jewish reader who among other things wrote, "... and we know what you are..." A German friend told me the other day that while sitting with a friend at a café during a recent visit to Germany, she voiced her criticism of Israel. As soon as she raised the topic, her friend began to appear nervous, looking anxiously over her shoulder, clearly worried that someone might overhear the conversation.

² To readers who are less versed in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I recommend Ilan Pappé's book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*.

In the first example Ian suffered direct backlash for voicing his views publicly. But the second example was closer to self-censorship. People worry about what *might* happen if they voice criticism of Israel, or are in the company of someone who does. They choose to gag themselves or their friends voluntarily, fearing to be seen as, or accused of being, antisemitic. It is clearly not permissible to voice criticism of Israel in public in Germany and possibly elsewhere in the West. Israel and its supporters have been successful in equating criticism of Israel with antisemitism. It doesn't have to make sense logically to be effective. It just has to press the right emotional buttons.

Given that this is how things are, I think a book like this is needed. Although non-Jews shouldn't need permission from Jews, under the circumstances I do hope that this book will empower and encourage more non-Jewish people to speak up with confidence and without fear.

In 2002 in post 9/11 Australia, Muslim women identifiable by their traditional dress were being spat on, called names and physically threatened and assaulted in the streets of Sydney and Melbourne. In response I initiated National Headscarf Day³. On 29 November that year, I asked women of all backgrounds to wear a headscarf as a gesture of solidarity with the women who were being attacked. It was meant to send a message to the attackers that their behaviour would not be tolerated, and that Muslim women had support in the general community in Australia. National Headscarf Day drew a great deal of media attention and almost every interviewer wanted to know why I was doing this. Implied in the question was the assumption that the last thing a Jewish person would want to do is to support Muslims.

I thought that I didn't need a reason to support Muslim

³ You can read about National Headscarf Day in Dr Shakira Hussein's chapter, "Looking in or looking out? Stories on the multiple meanings of veiling" in *Beyond the Hijab Debates: New Conversations on Gender, Race and Religion*. There is also information about it on my website at: <http://www.avigailabarbanel.me.uk/headscarf.day.html>.

women, or anyone else for that matter. When people were singled out and attacked by prejudiced and ignorant mobs because of who they were or what they wore, I felt that I had a duty to do something about it. It shouldn't matter who I am or what my background is.

In this book I wanted to explore not so much the question of *why* Jewish activists support the Palestinians. I think I know the answer to that. I wanted to know what is different or special about these activists that they are prepared to do this, when the vast majority of Jews do not. What might be the factors that help them to do what they are doing? Is there something about the way they were brought up, or the values they were taught; are they more caring than others, less fearful perhaps? I am curious to know what enables these people to stand up against powerful opposition and express views that are so unpopular in the mainstream Jewish community around the world and in Israel, and that often invite abuse, threats, violence, rejection and labels like "self-hating Jew", "Nazi", "Israel-hater" and even "antisemite".

In a conversation with Hazel Kahan, another contributor to this book, I once lamented that there are plenty of Jewish human rights lawyers and activists who would fight for the rights of anyone *except* the Palestinian people. Somehow their moral indignation and need to help others come to an abrupt halt and the "shutters go down", when the suffering of the Palestinians is mentioned. Hazel told me that this selective attitude to justice and human rights is well recognised, and that there is even a term for it: PEP, Progressive Except on Palestine.

The purpose of this book is to try to understand why the contributors are not PEPs. I am curious to know how they were able to break out of a powerful prison of belief, tradition and identity; a belief system that taught all of us that Palestinians are our mortal enemy and that any sympathy towards them amounts to a complete betrayal of our people, not to mention an existential threat to the state of Israel.

Over the years I have been told that I was "courageous" for

standing up for Palestinian rights. I have often wondered about this. Why exactly does it need to take courage to stand up for Palestinian rights? Should people need courage to protect the rights of abused children, to stand up against human trafficking, domestic abuse or racism? But I am certain that it took courage for William Wilberforce to stand up against the slave trade, and for the suffragettes to demand that women be given the right to vote.

It takes courage to object to, or protest against something that is still an accepted, well-established mainstream ideology or practice. I hope that those who fight for the rights of children or against human trafficking are *not* told that they are silly or bad and that abuse of children or human trafficking are perfectly fine. But when Wilberforce fought against the slave trade, he was certainly told that the slave trade was not only accepted, but that it was a good practice that was essential for the British economy; and that in any case dark-skinned people weren't human beings like white people, and did not deserve the same rights. I am sure that there were people who just didn't understand what he was on about, just as there were people (including many women) who didn't understand why women needed the right to vote. Back then, most people believed that women were less intelligent than men, and that it was unnatural for women to participate in politics.

Zionism, the Jewish nationalist ideology that dreamed up and executed the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine, is still legitimate. Israel enjoys relatively widespread Western support despite the fact that it is a colonial and apartheid ethnocracy; despite the fact that in the service of colonialism and apartheid it commits human rights violations, war crimes, oppression and theft of land and other resources. Against the backdrop of general support for Israel, and the refusal of the world's power brokers to intervene to stop or change the situation, the only people left to protest (except the Palestinians themselves) are individuals and groups who are not part of the world's power elite. These people are being told that they are stupid and bad because they don't understand that

the oppression and dispossession of the Palestinians is necessary for Israeli “security”; that the Palestinians are bad people who are “not like us”, and that they are not *really* victims but rather “terrorists” who endanger the entire Western world. When this is the atmosphere in which activists work, it does indeed require courage to stand up for the rights of Palestinians.

But there is another important reason why Jewish people need courage to object to Zionism and to Israel’s behaviour. This reason has to do with the nature of Zionism itself, and the way it is being taught. Despite being a secular ideology, Zionism has a quasi-religious quality to it, and it seems to elicit strong emotions and zeal in people, in the same way that religion often does. Zionist ideology has also found a way to tie itself to people’s identity. One does not believe in Zionist ideology, one *is* a Zionist.

But Zionism doesn’t just have a religious quality to it. In many Jewish communities it has taken the place of religion, or has at least become blurred with it. This is reflected in quite a few of the stories in this book. I remember how surprised I was the first time I saw David Ben Gurion’s⁴ portrait on the big sign outside the synagogue in Canberra, where I lived for eleven years. I am not religious, but if for some reason I wanted to attend a service at that synagogue, I would effectively be endorsing Israel and Zionism regardless of my values, just by sitting inside that building. With the exception of some anti-Zionist ultra Orthodox Jewish groups, Zionism and Jewishness are offered as a package to Jews, inside and outside Israel. In most cases if you are a member of a Jewish community or a synagogue, it is understood and expected that you would also be a Zionist and support Israel no matter what.

This blurring of boundaries didn’t happen by accident. From its very beginning Israel understood that it needed the support of Jewish communities around the world. It needed their donations, and it needed to make sure that they would represent Israel’s

⁴ David Ben Gurion was a prominent Zionist leader, Israel’s first Prime Minister and is a Zionist symbol. He was one of the people responsible for the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians in 1948.

interests in their countries.

Diaspora Jews are also important to Israel because of demographic reasons. Creating a Jewish ethnocracy was the whole point of Zionism. Israel as it is, is not the creation of a fanatical few or an unintended mistake. The Zionist movement never set out to create just another Western style liberal democracy for everyone. Jews wanted a state where they could live only, or mostly with Jews, where they can run the country themselves and make their own laws without worrying about others hating them, discriminating against them, legislating against them, expelling them, forcing them to convert or persecuting them. Given that the Palestinian citizens of Israel are a large minority of over 20%, Israeli Jews are afraid that one day they would outnumber the Jews and take over the country. To them this would mean the end of the dream of a Jewish state, and consequently the end of safety for Jews. Israel therefore feels the need to ensure that there is an ample supply of Jews who could be convinced to come and live in Israel, in case the Jewish birthrate in Israel isn't enough to keep Jews a majority.

The Zionist programme was morally wrong because the land of Palestine was already populated, and it took ethnic cleansing (that is still ongoing) in order to appropriate it. But to a Jew the argument for an ethnocracy, an exclusively Jewish state, can sound logical and certainly necessary, even in the face of this terrible injustice. In the eyes of many Jews the long record of Jewish persecution culminating in the Holocaust, seems to justify the desire to have an exclusively Jewish state. Many Jews feel that they do not trust the world, and are afraid that what happened before will happen again. Zionism has always provided them with the solution to their anxieties—the state of Israel, the Jewish safe haven. Many Jews feel that they simply cannot afford not to have Israel, even if it's far from perfect.

Israel has been using its *Hasbara* programme to achieve these goals. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word *hasbara* is simply “explaining”: explaining Israel's position, its history and its needs for the purpose of gaining support for Israel. But *hasbara* is a

euphemism for propaganda that entices and excites, uplifts and inspires. It preys on deep feelings of fear (of antisemitism), on loyalty, and on the need to belong. It also makes immigrating to Israel seem like a noble goal that should be the life purpose of every Jew in the West.

The Hasbara programme teaches Israeli mythology to Western Jews from early childhood in a variety of contexts: Jewish schools, synagogues, Sunday schools and youth movements. It sponsors and runs various programmes for young Jewish people to visit or study in Israel in the hope that they would develop a sense of connection to Israel and would one day come to settle there, or at least continue to support Israel financially and politically. The mythology that the Hasbara teaches is based on the official and dishonest version of the history of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Margot Salom refers to this as the Leon Uris version of history as depicted in the novel *Exodus*. Zionist mythology can be powerful enough to move even non-Jews to tears. But in Jews it is designed to create a particularly personal sense of identification with Israel, and a strong desire to support it and be a part of it.

Jewish culture, which is already based on a sense of victimhood, relates easily to a view of Israel as an innocent victim state, surrounded by enemies who wish to destroy it and push its Jewish inhabitants into the sea. The Palestinians, if they are even mentioned, are presented as antisemites who just hate the Jews and don't want them to have a state of their own. Nowhere in this official mythology is the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians mentioned. In fact Israel is presented as a just and peace-loving, enlightened Western-style democracy whose noble and innocent military force follows the principle of "purity of arms", doesn't harm civilians and only fights wars of self-defence.

A key point in this mythology is that the Palestinians left voluntarily in 1948. I was taught at school in Israel that the "Arabs"—I wasn't exposed to the word "Palestinians" until my mid-twenties—were "just peasants" who didn't mind leaving, because it didn't really matter to them where they lived. In his piece, Ilan Pappé calls the historians responsible for this version of his-

tory, “fraudulent”. But fraudulent or not, this version of history has been effective in ensuring widespread Jewish support for Israel.

The stories in this book show that some Jews do begin to question their loyalty to Israel when they learn the truth. So it appears that Israel’s fear of losing support if people knew the truth is in fact justified, and that lying or “massaging the truth” has been a successful, if immoral, tactic.

Israeli Hasbara succeeded in making a powerful link between Jewishness and support of Israel. This link has become almost a fact of life and has long been taken for granted in most Jewish communities in the West. So when Jews begin to stand up against the Occupation, against Israeli apartheid and for the rights of the Palestinians, they are in fact decoupling this automatic link. They are saying that it is possible to be Jewish and not support Israel.

Because of the nature of Zionism, Jewish people who question must wrestle with the very essence of who they are. They have to examine their sense of belonging and what it means for them to be Jewish, not to mention face heavy guilt that by “supporting Israel’s enemies”, they believe they are undermining the Jewish state and helping to destroy it.

Most Jews can’t or won’t do it. The more blurred the boundary between our beliefs and our identity, and the more strongly our beliefs are linked with our existential fears, the harder it is to question or let go of them. To question and re-evaluate our sense of who we are, is one of the hardest things any human being can do, and few choose to take this path.

The contributors belong to the minority who do. Some had to abandon their idea of Jewishness altogether. They no longer feel a need for tribal identification. Others found a new understanding of what it means for them to be Jewish—one that rejects the view of the Jew as the eternal and only victim, and that refuses to live in fear. Some have found, and even founded, new Jewish communities and groups of like-minded people, where it is permissible to be critical of Israel, while retaining a sense of Jewish identity. These people are “coming out” of a collective cultural closet. They

have chosen to join the rest of the human race as equals, not as people whose identity is founded on fear and anticipation of the next Holocaust. They are unusual.

Some of the contributors responded to my invitation to participate in the book, and others volunteered to have their stories included when they heard about this project. Sometimes it took a little convincing on my part, because none of the contributors think that there is anything special about them and what they are doing. They feel that they are just doing what they know is right, and are responding to their own need to live with integrity and according to their values.

This book was not meant as a political debate or a collection of political essays or statements. There is no shortage of those. It was intended as an exposé of challenging personal journeys. It's another angle on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one we don't often encounter.

The contributors don't share a political position on Palestine and Israel; in fact there is quite a diversity of opinions, as well as ideas about the way forward. Some of the contributors belong to activist groups, and others are private people who do their work alone.

Most of the stories were written in response to a brief that I initially sent around. I asked the contributors to say something about their background and their relationship to Zionism. I wanted to know whether they had experienced an evolution or change in their views and if so, what caused it. I asked whether there were special events, incidents, books or figures that had influenced or inspired them to move in the direction they have chosen. I asked each contributor to share something about his or her inner journey. I was curious to know what it was like emotionally when views were beginning to change and evolve. I also asked if there were any important turning points on their journey, and asked authors to comment on what *they* think made them choose to become active in this area, when so many choose the opposite. Another question I asked was whether the authors suffered in any

way for their views and their activism, and whether they paid a price for them.

As you will see, the contributors responded each in his or her own unique way. To me the stories seem to complement each other, and together paint a valuable picture of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and of activism in this area.

I was careful that my editing did not compromise each writer's style. I wanted to honour each writer's authentic voice as much as possible. I was especially careful with Ruth Tenne's story because Ruth wrote it from a child's perspective and it was important to her that this perspective was preserved.

Because the book is published in the United Kingdom, and for the sake of consistency, I changed the spelling into British English. This means that even American or Canadian contributors may "sound" British, although they wrote their stories in their respective English dialects.

Over the past few years I have noticed that when people use the word "Israeli" they are referring *only* to the Jewish citizens of Israel. The reality is that the Palestinian citizens of Israel who make up more than 20% of the population are also Israelis, but the word "Israeli" does not include them. This is an interesting example of how language can reinforce the idea that Israel is a country only of Jews, and only for Jews. Therefore, for the sake of accuracy and to avoid colluding with this, I have replaced, in many places, the word "Israeli" with the phrases "Jewish Israeli" or "Israeli Jew".

In some places I added footnotes, where I felt that it was necessary to explain or clarify something. I was particularly aware that some readers may not be familiar with certain Jewish terms, concepts or organisations. To distinguish between my footnotes and those offered by the authors, I added my initials (AA) at the end of my footnotes.

I wasn't sure about the order in which the stories should appear. In the end I decided to group them according to country of residence, and then in alphabetical order of the author's surname. It's not necessarily the best order, and certainly not the only one

possible. But I have tried to reflect the fact that I view all of us as equal.

The number of stories included under each country is not representative of the number of Jewish activists in that country. It is simply a reflection of the number of stories that I was able to invite to this book.

Except in Ruth Tenne's case, I did not include a biography with the stories. I think the writers do a good job of describing their background and their activism. Ruth's story however, focussed more on her childhood experience of witnessing the establishment of the state of Israel and the 1948 war, and I felt that there was a need for a short biography to describe her more recent activist work.

I feel privileged and humbled to have had the opportunity to edit this book, and I am deeply grateful to all the contributors who made the effort to write their stories. I know that for many, if not all, writing for this book was not easy, as they had to delve into deeply emotional issues and share personal details. I am grateful also to my husband Ian for his ongoing support, and for his help in typesetting and designing this book.

The process of editing was an emotional experience, and I found myself crying on a few occasions along the way. Many of the experiences, emotions and realisations that the contributors describe, resonated with my own, and many of my own memories surfaced as I was reading the stories.

I hope that reading these wise, brave and often moving stories will encourage you, the reader, to think about your place in the world, your loyalty and attachment to your particular group or belief system and your values. I hope that they will encourage you to seek the truth and question everything, even long-held and cherished beliefs. As the contributors have all learned, we cannot assume that everything we are taught is always the truth, even if it is comfortable or attractive, and even if we want very much to believe it. It is our individual responsibility to make sure that we are well informed and exposed to as many sources of information

as possible.

There are injustices everywhere that affect individuals and groups. Somewhere along the way I learned that every crime, violation or act of injustice requires three participants: a victim, a perpetrator and a bystander. As long as bystanders exist, so will crime and injustice. The role of perpetrators is obvious, but it is bystanders who guarantee that trauma, humiliation and suffering will continue to reverberate for generations and prevent millions of human beings from fulfilling their potential.

This book is a tribute to those who will not keep quiet, who make trouble, who refuse to be bystanders, and who intervene to let perpetrators know that what they are doing is wrong, and to support and protect their victims. These courageous souls are an example of what humanity can and should be. The more people join them and refuse to remain bystanders, the harder it will be for perpetrators to commit their crimes.

If you are already involved in some form of activism, you are a part of a noble tradition, and I am sure you will find kindred spirits in this book. If you are not, I hope these stories will encourage you to see that it is possible to stand up for the rights of others, even against strong opposition. It isn't easy, but it's fulfilling and it's right. It is certainly life, and world-changing.

I welcome thoughts and comments from readers. You can write to me at: avigail@fullyhuman.co.uk.

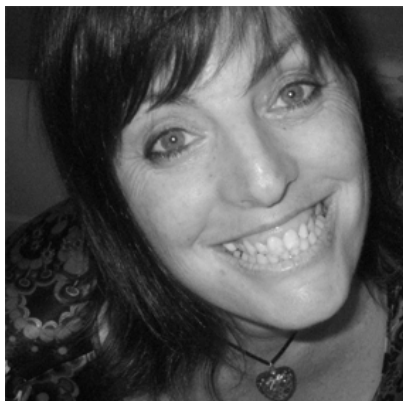
Avigail Abarbanel
Inverness-Shire
September 2011

PART I

AUSTRALIA

Am I an activist?

Sivan Barak



My name is Sivan Barak. I'm a sister, a mother, a daughter, a friend and in my humble opinion I may well be an activist. But the question that is far more interesting to me is why I became one, and this is still not clear to me.

My education, both formal and informal, has not been mainstream. Learning to question everything has probably been the best lesson I ever learned, but it has also caused me and my family much turmoil.

Questioning is an incessant quality that has affected every aspect of my life. There have been many questions, big and small, but one particular question recurs in a multitude of scenarios, and it is a complex one to ask. So I always place it within a story.

Let me ask you, the reader, my question and I ask that you share it also with your friends and family.

Imagine two close friends driving along a beach road on a lovely spring afternoon, listening to music, seemingly without a

care in the world. Suddenly a car swerves towards them, an accident occurs, the cars are destroyed yet the two friends are untouched.

After the terrible sounds of glass shattering, smell of oil and burning rubber, the adrenaline rush subsides, the body stops shaking. Then there is silence.

In these moments a shift could occur for the two involved in the incident, a deep shift in their perspective on life.

Why is it that one friend may emerge from this traumatic event with a renewed attitude to life, seeing it as a precious gift to be cherished and relished? Perhaps even re-evaluating her attitude toward what is most important, deciding to live life fearlessly from now on, take risks, “stop putting it off” as she comes to a realisation that life might end tomorrow?

Meanwhile the second friend could see it in a completely opposing light. She could cling to the fear and drama experienced at that moment of impact, seeing the near death experience in a fatalistic way, and from that day on live in perpetual victimhood.

What lies within our minds or hearts that leads us down these two opposing paths?

Crossroads or turning points, and the choices we make, have always fascinated me. Is it the way we are wired, our genetics, or our upbringing and family values?

On the surface my destiny as an activist was set before I had any political or social awareness. But the road taken, and the path down the Yellow Brick Road, never led me to the Emerald City, and I am still not sure where home is.

To understand who Sivan Barak is and why I am in this book, I need to tell my story. It began in the United States in 1964, it spans across three continents and ends in Australia in 2011. To pinpoint the precise crossroad that morphed me into an activist I will trace my life junctions from both ends chronologically, applying a magnifying glass to significant moments that made me the woman I am today. To be honest, until I was asked to write this chapter I never gave this a thought. So in the process of writ-