

Needed: A Female Arab-version of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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The security and social anarchy that has overtaken Palestinian society in the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza, in the wake of the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip, has created a sense of deep frustration among the Palestinian citizenry within Israel. They and their leaders have been left stunned and dismayed by scenes of vandalism and the destruction of national symbols. Today, I find myself dealing with the sources of this dismay, which has served to bring into focus the ambivalent feelings I experience as a Palestinian Israeli woman, living as we do in a twilight zone between belonging and separatism.

The search of the Palestinian citizen of Israel for meaning, belonging and self-definition is not something new, nor has it ever existed in a way that is detached from the larger socio-political reality of the Arab world and the Middle East. The war in Iraq, the collapse of values and ideology in extensive parts of the Arab world, the Second Lebanon War and the chaos in Gaza have combined to contribute to a despair-inducing collapse of the Palestinian dream.

The search process has also been influenced by the failure of the process of Israelization among the Palestinian-Israeli public. The main reason for that failure is the fact that there is no real difference between Israeliness and Jewishness, and so the Israeli Palestinian is left with no possibility for truly belonging. And, if until now the Palestinian citizen of Israel was able to repress confronting the painful search for meaning, the Hamas takeover of Gaza has come along and made the task of dealing with self-definition and the search for meaning an obligation that can no longer be avoided.

The process of self-definition and the concern with identity constitute a mission created by the Palestinian citizen for ourselves, but also a process that has been forced upon us, since we are part of a collective and considered inferior to the society within which we live. In the existing reality, we as Palestinian citizens find

ourselves with a split identity, much like an unwanted child. The failure of the attempt to belong to the Arab world in general and to the Palestinian people in particular, on the one hand, and the desire to belong and to be equal to an Israeli, on the other, only aggravates our existential situation and transform it into a fragile reality.

Not only do I experience this identity struggle as a Palestinian citizen of Israel, it is further complicated by the fact that I am a woman. As a Palestinian Israeli woman, I have a unique position in how I perceive the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Until now, the conflict in our region has been created and led predominately by men while women have been excluded from the decision-making process. I would even go as far as to define the conflict before us as a "male conflict."

Even though women have not had a significant role in creating and continuing this conflict, they have definitely felt the consequences of conflict and war - as mothers, as wives, as daughters. Women are those who bury their loved ones; women are those who are left with babies in their arms or wombs; even our bodies have been objectified to carry out this war by turning our wombs into what is now commonly referred to as "military wombs."

The current reality requires new local leadership that will be able to lead the Arab-Palestinian public in Israel into full integration into Israeli society while giving a place of honor to the differences between the Jewish and Arab publics. This leadership needs to offer a new way of dealing with the reality – one based on dialogue, on a peaceful, non-violent struggle and one that appreciates life. In order to make this possible, this new leadership must also fully integrate women on both sides into the political system.

Women have an alternative agenda and being half of the world population, it should be taken into consideration in the political world. Women bring a spiritual light into human society, and their values must be part of political decision making throughout the world.

Women have everything to do with peace, not war. They can play a major role in bridging gaps. They are able to reach out and lend a hand, irrespective of race, color, gender or religion. When Miriam put Moses in the little basket and threw it to the Nile, she must have known that he would be saved by another woman. She sent him to enemy territory, but she knew that no mother would become the enemy of a child.

This story wraps within itself the hope that if women had such insights thousands of years ago, maybe Jewish and Arab women today could lead processes of change. They could play a major role in creating a society where Palestinian Israelis would develop a sense of belonging and are treated as equals, both in law and practice.

The unjust reality of the Palestinian Israeli second-class citizenship has destructive consequences that influences the Israeli society and is turning it into a society that I truly believe it doesn't want to be. The oppressed suffer from oppression, while the oppressor suffers from being an oppressor. And when he or she causes suffering, then the society loses its soul. It is women's job to save the soul of each individual and the soul of the entire society.

As a Palestinian Israeli woman, I also have a dream. My dream is to see both peoples living together in peace and security; for a better future for Palestinian society is a better future for Jewish Israeli society. My dream is to see Palestinian Israelis living side-by-side in equal terms with our Jewish brothers and sisters. My dream is to see my children and Jewish children not fighting against one another, but fighting together to build peace and a healthier society.

I have begun to realize this dream throughout my experiences as a resident of NSWAS, an intentional mixed Palestinian-Israeli village. As a community, we are working together, Palestinians and Jews, to prove that things can be different. We are keeping in mind that we are an oasis, as our name implies. We know we are unique, and our experience and proven success can serve as a message of hope and as a model, or at least a basis for others to bring a better future to both sides. My dream is to see the model of life in NSWAS become a general model for coexistence and a better life in Israel.

In order to fulfill this dream, we need a new leadership that will deal with the complexities and difficult decisions. The Israeli state, after all, has not opened its arms to the Palestinian citizen, but rather has chosen a policy that has systematically eroded our identity and discriminated against us.

Our struggle today as Palestinian citizens is for an Israeli citizenship that is equal in practice as well as in theory; therefore, maybe a female-version of Martin Luther King, Jr., is needed to make my dream become a reality. As we say in Arabic, "Insha'allah" which means "As God wills it," and may I add, if we will it too.