

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2025, Term III.1

### Opening Comments

In Term One of the Mercy Seminar, we examined the way that the theme of exile and return is encoded and repeated in the narrative of Biblical Israel, first from Egypt and then from Babylon, which led to the deep desire to return from the 1900-year exile that began with the defeat of the Jews at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE. In Term Two, we looked at the way Christians understood Jewish exile as their just punishment for killing Jesus, and at the involvement of Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem. The focal point of Term Two was the development and triumph of Zionism, which was not based in the Bible or Rabbinic thought, but rather was a secular movement designed to free Jews from anti-Semitism by giving them a land in which they could exercise sovereignty over themselves. Zionism culminated in the establishment of the Jewish democratic state of Israel in 1948, which had taken place with the help of European countries, the United States, and the United Nations. For the first time since 70 CE, Jews had sovereignty in the land from which they had been expelled by the Romans.

In this term, we begin by looking at the tragic way in which the return of the Jews to their homeland directly entailed the exile of Palestinians from their homeland, especially in the years of 1947-1948. The history of this period is highly fraught and contested, as you can imagine, with the New Israeli Historian Benny Morris claiming that there was no clear strategy of ethnic cleansing during this period, and the New Israeli Historian Ilan Pappé claiming that there was. Pappé's position is echoed by other Israeli and Palestinian historians, and is the version I have included this evening.

However, the focus of the reading this evening is not to argue about who did what when, but rather to enter into the testimony of Palestinians regarding how they can only regard this traumatic event as a catastrophe, al Nakba, that affected the whole of the Palestinian people, both those who were forced into exile and those who remained in what became Israel. As the Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi says:

The Nakba represented a watershed in the history of Palestine and the Middle East. It transformed most of Palestine from what it had been for over a millennium—a majority Arab country—into a new state that had a substantial Jewish majority. This transformation was the result of two processes: the systematic ethnic cleansing of the Arab-inhabited areas of the country seized during the war; and the theft of Palestinian land and property left behind by the refugees as well as much of that owned by those Arabs who remained in Israel. There would have been no other way to achieve a Jewish majority, the explicit aim of political Zionism from its inception. Nor would it have been possible to dominate the country without the seizures of

land.

As Khalidi also notes, the Catastrophe was compounded by fierce inter-Arab rivalries, as well as intractable Palestinian differences, which Khalidi describes as “ultimately disastrous” for the Palestinian cause. We will clearly such differences on display later this term when we look at the positions of the PLO and Hamas regarding Israel and the nature of a Palestinian state.

The readings for this evening are meant to convey the ways in which Palestinians have been traumatized by the Nakba, and by the ways in which it has led them to formulate their own hopes for return from exile, including those Arabs who remained behind in Israel and became strangers in their own land. It is important to remember that 20% of Israel’s citizens are Muslim, Christian and Druze Arabs, and they have legal claim to full citizenship in Israel, although most would say that they have a second-class citizenship at best. But for all Palestinians, in Israel, in the West Bank and Gaza, or in exile in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, the Nakba is a shared trauma which has created a new shared identity. I will close with this reflection by Khalidi:

For all Palestinians, no matter their different circumstances, the Nakba formed an enduring touchstone of identity, one that has lasted through several generations. It marked an abrupt collective disruption, a trauma that every Palestinian shares in one way or another, personally or through their parents or grandparents. At the same time the Nakba provided a new focus for their collective identity, it broke up families and communities, dividing and dispersing Palestinians among multiple countries and distinct sovereignties. Even those still inside Palestine, whether refugees or not, were subject to three different political regimes: Israel, Egypt (for those in the Gaza Strip), and Jordan (for those on the West Bank and East Jerusalem). The condition of dispersal, *shitat* in Arabic, has affected the Palestinian people ever since.

It is especially tragic that the worst traumatic experience of the Jews throughout their history, the Holocaust in which six million Jews were murdered, was followed by the Nakba, which is the worst catastrophe that the Palestinians have experienced. Our goal in this seminar is not to decide which trauma is worse, but rather to begin to come to an understanding of the way the Palestinians describe their trauma, always holding in mind the trauma of the Jews, so that we might pray for the peace of Jerusalem with greater patience, compassion, and understanding.