

*The Olive Grove. A Palestinian Story*, by Deborah Rohan.  
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By Edward Tick

I read *The Olive Grove: A Palestinian Story* during the Hamas-Israel War, the terrorism against Israel, its genocidal war in Gaza, and the profound psychological and social changes both populations have undergone. Offering this review feels like a moral obligation.

I was born and raised in New York City during the decade of the 1950s. I was surrounded by countless WWII veterans, European refugees, and Nazi holocaust survivors. In that atmosphere, many knew about the sufferings of the Jewish people, their need for a safe homeland, and the struggle for the birth and recognition of the modern state of Israel. Then and there I never heard about the Palestinian people, their sufferings under foreign rulership, or their displacement by the invasions and influx of early Zionists.

*The Olive Grove* by Deborah Rohan is a memoir of the Palestinian people told through multiple generations of the Moghrabi family and their friends and neighbors from 1913-1948, from the Ottoman through the British occupations and up through the Zionist invasions and the birth of modern Israel, in part through the terrorist violence of their organizations the Irgun and the Haganah. Kamel, the father of the family whose story is told, in exile in Lebanon from the violent incursions and destruction of his home village, blurts, “Must Palestinians forever pay the price for Hitler’s sins?” This statement, the Palestinian’s history as told through the family story, and this entire memoir, is a moving revelation and corrective to the imbalanced history we in the West have inherited regarding the politics and conditions of the Middle East.

It should be morally unquestionable that the Jewish people, after millennia of oppression, expulsions, diaspora, uncountable horrors against them unto genocide, and abandonment of their refugee populations by much of the world, deserve a safe and welcoming home. They have been displaced, homeless, and longing for a return to their original sacred homeland for literally thousands of years. The last sentence in their *Haggadah*, the traditional Passover prayerbook is, “Next Year in Jerusalem”.

Likewise, it should be morally unquestionable that the Palestinian people, who have lived and thrived in the Middle East through millennia of invasions, violent occupations, and oppression, deserve theirs on lands they have tended, farmed, labored over, and loved for as long. The untrue myth of Palestine promoted after the world wars was that it was a barren, undeveloped land inhabited by only a few simple farmers. In fact, even under occupations it was a thriving region with burgeoning agriculture and significant urban commercial centers that shipped resources and goods in and out of Gaza to world markets. The Palestinians, too, have longed for self-rule of their sacred homeland for countless generations.

World history and great power politics put these two peoples in bloody conflict and collision since the world wars. Both peoples were denied adequate refuge, help or support by powers large and small. Both peoples were largely unwanted in the countries that voiced support for one or the other. Great powers gave little succor, first controlling their territories and governments, then forcing them into collision in the Holy Land so dear to both. This conflict, with only occasional abeyance but never a secure peace, has been raging for many decades. The present war is its latest horrific iteration.

*The Olive Grove* begins with the family living in Akka, Palestine in 1913, during the Ottoman occupation. It follows them through generations of wandering and living in the Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon of their times. This was a rural family whose livelihood was largely dependent upon farming and tending their olive groves. Under the Ottoman and British regimes, we learn of the family's and communities' struggles against natural disasters such as cholera and locust plagues. We witness unjust and oppressive political systems under the ruling empires and powers. We hear of lands being bought and seized by early Zionists, forced separations of populations, the British burning crops, raiding villages, arrests, and imprisonment of those suspected of or practicing resistance or advocating self-rule as was promised by their early mandate. We learn of manipulations and cheating by the powers or occupiers to obtain wanted goods, and torture and imprisonment as too-common practices. We witness expulsion from their homes and regions and impoverished survival in other countries.

We also witness beautiful, soothing, loving, and hopeful dimensions of their lives. We hear of the wisdom the land brings to those who tend it, their loyalty and husbandry, their full identification with it such that land and people are one, their planting and tending of olive groves so that family and people will have sustenance over many generations. We watch their concern and nurturing

of their children, grandchildren, friends and neighbors. We meet Jewish friends and neighbors and witness how they lived and grew together in peace, contentment, mutual respect and concern for centuries and before modern politics tore them asunder. We sit in on delightful community meals where, no matter the religion, everyone feasted, gossiped, celebrated and worried together in mutual support. We watch elders of each religion and every social class care for each other and raise their children in harmony. And always, there is the love of the land and its principle bounty, the olive.

These conditions do not last. Under the Ottomans and the British, and then with the influx of early Zionists and the multitudes of refugees from war and genocide-ravaged Europe, everything deteriorates. Men are imprisoned, tortured, sentenced to death. Homes are destroyed. Olive groves are uprooted. Goods are stolen. Children are tortured. New armed settlers invade. Palestinians organize and arm for self-defense. Long-time Jewish friends and neighbors flee. Over time people adapt to the oppression and wars. Hatred grows. Various illnesses as well as symptoms of what we now know as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder erupt in the population and negative personality traits replace what were once good, kind, moral characteristics. Villages are attacked, razed, occupied. Long-established communities dissolve. The refugee crisis that characterizes the region grows as no country wants the displaced and newly homeless. Families that were well-off become impoverished and in exile cannot find work to support themselves. Their family heads become so weary, weak, ill, disheartened that, as one son says of their father, “sometimes it seems as if his soul has died.” Finally, after generations of occupation by the great powers, Israel is founded and hundreds of thousands of Jewish people relocate to this ancient homeland and build new settlements. Many international human rights groups have labeled the Israeli practices apartheid. The Palestinians realize they have lost their lands, homes, businesses. Over time, “each day of hard reality diminishes our dream of return a little bit more.” Finally, “There is no home for anyone to return to... We are never going back.” From a region that had been peaceful, cooperative, based in an agrarian love of land, family, and neighbors of any religion and class, we arrive at the conditions at homelessness, refugee camps, hatred, imprisonments, illnesses, exile, and deaths in despair, and armed resistance. As Heba Zaphirious-Zarifi, a Palestinian Jungian analyst living in London, explains, from the Palestinian perspective, “ Hamas for some are considered freedom fighters. Anyone under occupation under international law has the right to resist. Israel has no ‘legal’ right because it is the occupier. Under international law it is illegal of an

occupier to 'defend' themselves." Finally, over this last century, we arrive at the world we have inherited today.

This is a rapid and impersonal summary of *The Olive Grove's* slow, loving, and beautiful, sad, painful, and intimately portrayed and experienced conditions that the family and community suffer across the troubled twentieth century. The story is deeply personal and compelling. We know the good, kind, devoted, well-meaning human beings who live this tale. It is not distant political and sociological analysis, but history as real people experience it. Ultimately, Deborah Rohan's *The Olive Grove* awakens us to understanding and compassion for all the people of the Middle East who have suffered this difficult story. We come to understand how complex and difficult it is and will be to find solutions, and how every deserving people and culture, the Palestinians and the Jews, are caught in conditions imposed on them by world history. The Jewish people had been homeless and stateless for millennia. It is a heart-wrenching irony that the people who survived the Eastern European pogroms and Nazi genocide, should turn to the same strategies to ensure their own homeland off the lands of others, that the victims of one generation become the perpetrators of the next. Likewise, the Palestinian people over many generations have suffered being landless, homeless, brutally oppressed, and stateless. They suffer, as the Jews had, "the pain of not belonging anywhere." Contemporary conditions make *The Olive Grove* an imperative read today.

In Biblical times, Isaac and Ishmael were half-brothers, both the sons of their original common patriarch Abraham. The Arabic and Jewish peoples are both the offspring of these two. Millennia later, their offspring are still at war over Father Abraham's land and inheritance. If we look beyond politics, we can see that they are mirror images – both displaced, both denied their ancestral lands, both manipulated by great powers, both victims and now both aggressors. Not politics and history, certainly not endless violence, hatred, mistrust, and warfare, but only and finally an affirmation of these common roots and conditions and their embrace in brotherly love can end this ageless scourge that renders the Holy Land an endless bloody battlefield.