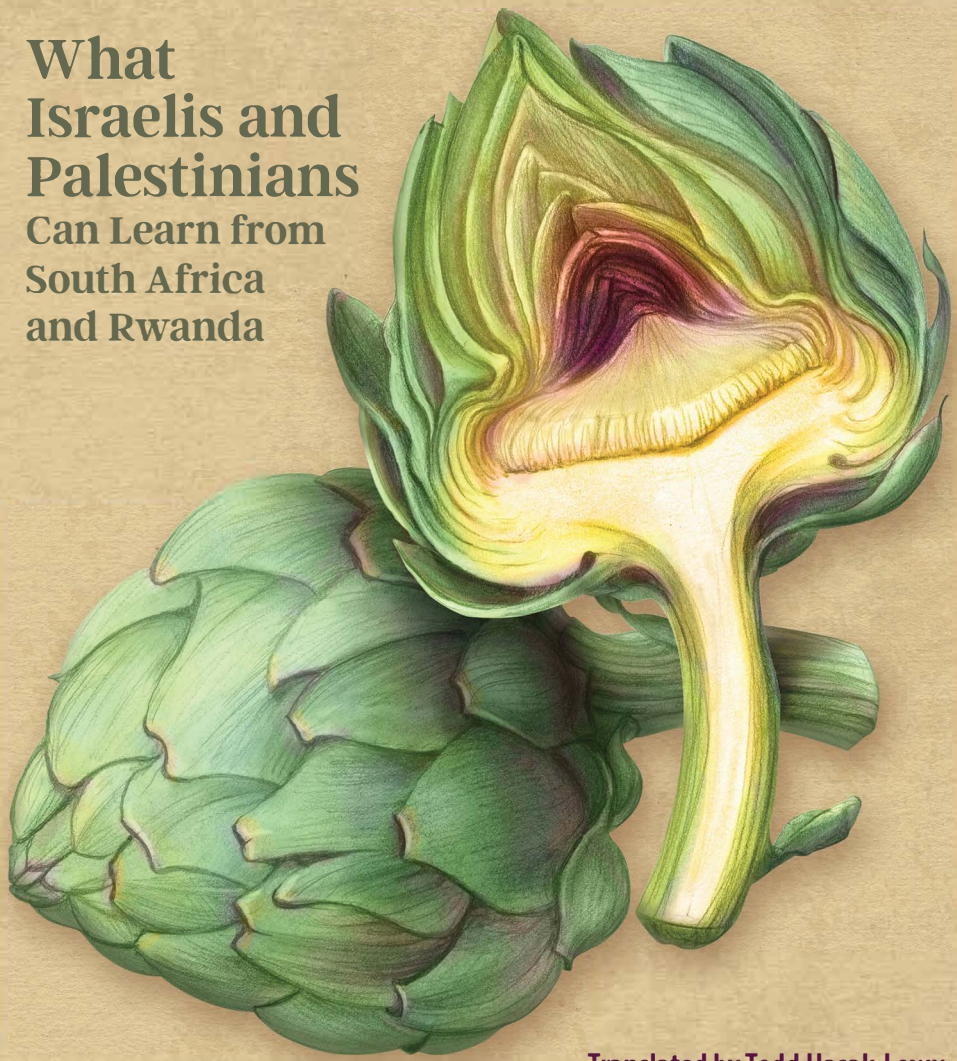
On Reconciliation

MAYA SAVIR

What Israelis and Palestinians Can Learn from South Africa and Rwanda



Translated by Todd Hasak-Lowy

Foreword by Aziz Abu Sarah

coauthor of *The Future Is Peace*

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Plough

Published by Plough Publishing House
Walden, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com

Originally published in Hebrew as על הפיוס. Copyright © 2017, 2025 by Maya Savir. This translation published by arrangement with the author and the Deborah Harris Agency.

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ISBN 978-1-63608-209-7

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data pending.

Printed in the United States of America

To my children.
I love you endlessly.

And now I have to confess the unpardonable and
the scandalous, in an age which scorns happiness.
I am a happy man.
And I am going to tell you the secret of my happiness.
It is quite simple. I love mankind. I love love. I hate hate.
I try to understand and accept.

Jean Cocteau

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Foreword

Aziz Abu Sarah

AS A PALESTINIAN in East Jerusalem, I grew up believing that peace was impossible. My brother Tayseer died after being tortured by Israeli soldiers in 1991. He was nineteen years old, and I was ten. I grew up angry, believing that vengeance was justice. I couldn't imagine peace or reconciliation in our region. As Maya Savir explains in this book, we cannot use the logic of war and conflict when envisioning peace. It was eight years before I began to unlearn the logic of revenge, aggression, and hate. I had to go through a transformative journey to understand the logic of peacemaking. That journey started on the day that, for the first time in my life, as a young adult, I met an Israeli Jew who spoke to me as an equal and listened to my story. In the years since, I've learned that forgiveness is not easy; it is not even simply an emotional decision. It is something I had to train both my heart and my mind to embrace. It's a decision I still have to hold on to every day.

I have now worked with bereaved families on both sides of this conflict for almost three decades. I was first introduced to Maya by Maoz Inon, an Israeli Jew whose parents were killed by Hamas on October Seventh. Maoz has become a brother to me; together we wrote the book *The Future Is Peace*, and Maya is one of the people we interviewed while writing the book. In Israel, Maoz always carries Hebrew copies of Maya's book in his backpack, to give anyone who will read it. I know some are inclined to dismiss this book because it was written by an

Israeli Jew, but this Israeli Jew is my sister in peace, and I hope you are able to hear her out.

In a time when the dominant language is shaped by bombs and wars, *On Reconciliation* offers a new language for imagining the future of Israelis and Palestinians, one grounded in political imagination, recognition, and equality. Israelis and Palestinians, like many people living in conflict zones around the world, are often convinced that their conflict is uniquely unsolvable, that their enemies are evil in ways never experienced in history, and that the other side could never accept a solution. Yet while every conflict has its own unique elements, many of the underlying dynamics, and the principles needed for resolution, remain similar.

Like Maya, I also spent time in Rwanda and South Africa, and I was moved to tears many times while there. I left both countries with a renewed belief that Israelis and Palestinians have much to learn from other conflicts. Rwanda experienced one of the most horrific genocides in history: one million people were killed in just three months. The level of dehumanization and oppression in South Africa is beyond what most people in the world can imagine. And yet, both societies found ways to pursue reconciliation, break the cycle of violence, and shape a new reality. It is by no means a perfect reality in either country, but it has saved lives and created a path toward a better future.

I do not expect Palestinians or Israelis to be enthusiastic about the painful sacrifices that peacemaking requires. Many Palestinians will ask: How can we move toward reconciliation without punishing the enforcers and architects of the occupation? Doesn't justice mean holding accountable those who committed crimes?

While working in Northern Ireland, I met Alan McBride, whose wife was killed in an IRA terrorist attack. When I asked him why he campaigned for the "Yes" vote that ultimately led to the release of his wife's killer from prison, he told me that the future of his daughter was more important to him than revenge.

He told me how he cried the first time he saw the killer in a supermarket in his neighborhood. I know from my own life that his grief and pain will never disappear. Maya doesn't argue that peace will erase the trauma and pain we have experienced for decades. Rather, with stories from Rwanda and South Africa, she shows us that the pain of making peace is worth bearing because the alternative is endless death and destruction.

On Reconciliation makes the argument that since we are destined to live together, we must find a way to share the land. We must reject the logic of war and destruction, and begin imagining a different future, one in which our children no longer fear the sound of sirens or exploding missiles, the roar of airplanes dropping bombs, the pounding of soldiers at the door in the middle of the night, or the phone call informing us of yet another victim in our family.

The logic of peace and reconciliation is rooted in this hope for a better future. It is rooted in our love for our children and in our refusal to allow our failures to create more graveyards for the victims of war and violence. As Maya puts it, we have no alternative. The only question is how many lives will be lost and how much more destruction we will endure before we understand that reconciliation is the only path out of the current situation. Yes, we've had peace negotiations fail, but the failure of previous negotiations should not lead us to surrender hope. We have witnessed countless failed wars and endless escalations that have brought neither security nor freedom. Why do we give war unlimited chances, yet fear taking a leap of faith toward a peace agreement that could transform our discourse and our future? No peace agreement will ever be perfect. Maya is not imagining a utopia, because no such place exists.

Reconciliation is an ongoing process, one that we will continue working toward throughout our lives. Over time, we will grow into it and become better at it. I remember walking through the streets of Kigali late at night to get ice cream, feeling completely safe, and meeting young people in Rwanda

pursuing their dreams without fear, and thinking how much has changed! I remember speaking with black artists in South Africa and hearing about their aspirations. These experiences helped me imagine a world in which our future can look like theirs. That is why this book is so important: it brings these experiences to our peoples so that we, too, can imagine, dream, and build a different future.

I have worked in more than sixty countries around the world, and I have come to the same conclusion that Maya has highlighted in *On Reconciliation*. It is essential for us to draw upon local traditions, local knowledge, and indigenous peacebuilding practices. Maya shows how Rwanda's gacaca community reconciliation model succeeded far better than any imported Western peacebuilding framework could have. Palestinians and Israelis must also bring our own cultural knowledge and traditions of peacemaking into this process. Reconciliation is not a foreign concept to either Palestinians or Israelis, but it must be adapted to our own cultures to succeed.

Finally, *On Reconciliation* is a hopeful book – a book that will expand your imagination of what is possible and challenge you to reevaluate your assumptions about conflict and peace. It is personal, informative, truthful, inspiring, and, most importantly, deeply challenging. It presents a vision that all of us can become part of, if we allow our minds and hearts to imagine, to dream, and to act upon that dream.

Translator's Note

Todd Hasak-Lowy

IN THE PERIOD immediately following the attacks of October 7, 2023, it became common in Israel for people to say that they had "sobered up." At long last they were able to see clearly who stood on the other side of the conflict. Talk of peace and coexistence, in the opinion of these recently sober Israelis, was the talk of a deluded, dangerous idealism. There was only one language the Palestinians understood: force.

And so Israeli sobriety after October Seventh paved the way for a military campaign of unprecedented brutality, a campaign that, as of this writing, continues, and continues expanding in scope.

Make no mistake: *On Reconciliation* is, in its way, an extremely idealistic book, since it asks us to imagine a different, better future, a future in which reconciliation replaces conflict. But this book is also one of the most sober, and sobering, books I've read in some time. Yes, Maya Savir asks us to consider taking the leap into reconciliation. But not because some utopia awaits on the other side.

These pages, again and again, make it clear that whatever form Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation will take, the process will be deeply imperfect and indescribably painful. It will not be synonymous with justice. It will not erase trauma. It will not undo the past. All it will do – and this "all" must be enough – is make possible a future that is different than our terrible present. The promise of reconciliation is that our children, or at least our

children's children, can live lives not dominated by conflict.

The unwavering truth at the center of *On Reconciliation* is that Israelis and Palestinians are destined to live together. The only question is how. The answer, for decades, has been conflict. *On Reconciliation* lucidly and persuasively lays out the alternative. The cases of South Africa and Rwanda are presented not as paragons of reconciliation; rather, they are explored as instances in which terribly violent societies have found a way to embrace coexistence and reject conflict. Their processes are flawed, but they have nonetheless made possible better futures.

All of us are destined to live together. In Israel, Palestine, England, the United States, everywhere. The polarized atmosphere of our current reality brings with it fantasies of domination and erasure. But that is the stuff of delusion. The time has come for all of us to sober up and embrace reconciliation, not because it's perfect but because it is the best path forward.

Prologue

IF YOU'VE PICKED UP THIS BOOK, I'm guessing that you're sick of conflict. There's a part of you – so small, skeptical, and fragile it often seems out of reach – that believes it's possible to end conflict.

Or perhaps the opposite is true.

You picked up this book because you used to believe it is possible to end conflict, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but this belief has been shaken. You're heartbroken at having lost hope, but you no longer see a solution.

Most people where I live – Jews and Palestinians alike – identify with one of these positions, and sometimes alternate between them.

WHAT RELEVANCE could reconciliation possibly have in this moment? I write these words at the lowest point in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, lower even than the Dead Sea, the lowest spot on earth. It seems today that reconciliation and conflict (along with its end point, war) are parallel universes where not only the language is different, but the logic itself.

Both conflict and reconciliation are manifestations of humanity, just as day and night are manifestations of the ever-changing interactions between the exact same celestial bodies.

Therefore, though intuitively it may seem impossible, even at the height of conflict, reconciliation continues to exist as a very real possibility. The same societies that produced conflict can realign to produce reconciliation, much as the shifting positions of the earth, moon, and sun can turn night into day.

So there is no better time to consider, explore, and demand reconciliation. There is no better time to recall what is so easy to forget when you're trapped in a conflict that seems to have no solution:

All conflicts end.

It's in their nature. Even the very worst of wars – world wars and genocides – are proof of this.

The only question is how much more time and how many more lives will be lost before this end arrives.

Another truth is hidden inside that first truth: we are less rigid and closed up than we think. Humans are capable of change and societies are as well.

LIVING IN CONFLICT means a life where loss, pain, and helplessness are normalized. Indeed, they are normalized to such an extent that normal things – growth, beauty, self-fulfillment – appear strange.

Living in conflict means taking part in, and in fact being part of, a relationship that is at once symbiotic and sick.

Reconciliation transforms this relationship. Reconciliation heals it.

Conflict minimizes a person's freedom, much as poverty does. In fact, it prevents a person from realizing their full potential. It's impossible to overstate how much of a person's physical, emotional, and moral resources are consumed by living in conflict. A life free of conflict is a basic right of every human.[1]

Conflict's driving forces, its logic, penetrate every layer of life.

It is impossible to wage war without disregarding, to one extent or another, the suffering of those you're fighting against, and it is impossible to disregard this other without also disregarding parts of yourself, including aspects of your own suffering, namely, all that you must sacrifice in order to continue living in conflict.

1 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 3: "The right to life, liberty and security of person."

This means it is impossible to inflict suffering on another without inflicting suffering on yourself, without diminishing your own humanity.

Striving to end conflict means holding tight to your humanity, refusing to give up on it, refusing to give up on ourselves.

BUT IT IS VERY, VERY DIFFICULT to see these truths when you're trapped in conflict.

When you're ill, it's hard to think about anything but your physical suffering. When you're heartbroken, it's hard to feel anything but your heartbreak. It's even hard to imagine a situation in which your heart heals and opens up again.

Living in conflict is much the same, as it narrows your view of what exists and what is possible.

Yet you can enlarge your view of what is possible by turning your attention to other conflicts that ended with and through reconciliation. Learning about these cases will remind you of what is so easily forgotten when you're surrounded only by indescribable pain, retaliation, and suffering, and it seems that there's nothing on the horizon but more pain, more retaliation, and more indescribable suffering.

These other, very recent histories show that you are neither foolish nor naive to hope and work for a better future, a future of reconciliation, equality, safety, and, yes, even peace.

This book lays out a path for recovery from conflict. It shows that a different future is possible, and it offers you the tools for reaching it.

IN FEBRUARY 2014, I visited South Africa, where black and white citizens went through a reconciliation process after nearly fifty years of racist and oppressive rule by the white minority over the black majority. In October of that same year, I went to Rwanda, where the Hutu and Tutsi (the two ethnic groups that comprise most of the country's population) reconciled after

members of the Hutu rose up against members of the Tutsi and perpetrated a genocide against them.

Between these two visits, the Israeli summer blazed.

And a war, another one, was set off between Israel and Gaza. My use of passive voice does not reflect a fatalistic view that sees war, this war or any other, as a decree from on high. It reflects, perhaps, the feeling of helplessness that overwhelmed me in witnessing what seemed like a rerun of the same tragedy, with the actors yet again performing their roles with astonishing obedience. This obedience may also be a function of the fact that our consciousness is so rigid, so constricted that we're unaware we're obeying anything at all, and are thus unable to imagine a different possibility, one in which we don't bleed. More on this later.

I came to Africa because of food, or more precisely, the lack thereof. My trips to South Africa, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo were part of my job as executive director of JustSpirulina, a Tel Aviv–based NGO that focused on the treatment and prevention of malnutrition. In this humanitarian initiative, high school students from the Herzliya Hebrew Gymnasium in Tel Aviv worked in partnership with underprivileged communities, sharing their know-how in cultivating spirulina, an extraordinarily nutritious species of microalgae. The idea was that after acquiring this knowledge, each community would pass it on to another, creating a chain of solidarity and nutrition. In South Africa and Rwanda, knowledge flowed in both directions: we offered agricultural and technological expertise while seeking to learn from their experiences with the process of reconciliation. It was important for me to emphasize this reciprocity at the time. Not out of any pretension that I could break the mold of the sad, shameful, and deeply rooted power relations between savior and victim all on my own (despite my desire to do so). I merely hoped to signal the possibility of a different balance of power.

As I return to this book for its translation and write the final chapter, "Reconciliation After October Seventh," I am painfully

and shamefully aware that a lack of food – a famine crafted by my government – is spreading in Gaza, just over an hour's drive from my home. In the visuals pouring in from Gaza I recognize the swollen bellies of children suffering from kwashiorkor, a severe form of malnutrition. I recognize their eyes and their somewhat detached gaze, signaling that these children's departure from life may have begun. In conversations with friends and colleagues in Gaza I hear descriptions that evoke some of the more painful situations I encountered in Africa: at some point, malnourished children lose their appetite. Expressionless, they look at whatever meager food is handed to them as if it has nothing to do with them. In the face of such horrifying, unjustifiable reality, I am again compelled to act to bring it to an end, and to search for the path to reconciliation.

I always carry a notebook with me. You never know when an idea will flicker or a fragment will surface that demands a metaphor capable of freeing it from the limitations of its physical context. In the flood of experiences during my visits to Africa, it seemed my pen almost never left the page. Work-related matters intermixed with my impressions from discussions with people. Because I was in a constant writing position, I felt as if I were a pupil seated before my conversation partners.

During my decade of work on this initiative, I interacted with students and teachers, janitors and principals, farmers and agronomists, researchers and scholars, representatives of local organizations and government officials. But most of the conversations – the backbone of this book – were conducted during trips to help build infrastructure and conduct training for spirulina cultivation in South Africa (February 2014) and in Rwanda (October 2014 and September 2015). These conversations took place while building greenhouses and during training sessions, on the sidelines of work meetings, while walking or driving on roads, and in shared living quarters. I'm still in touch with many of the people I met and worked with back then.

In this book, these people will be identified by the initial of their first name only. Some of them live in a society where they cannot freely express themselves. As I would like the reader to think of them the same as the others, I refer to everyone in the same manner.

Operating within an overwhelming and taxing reality with the aim of changing something about it – in this case, the issue that brought me there, nutrition – demanded a sustained effort that is generally unknown to someone who takes their daily survival for granted. Simply put, the fantasy of being a "fly on the wall" vanished, leaving behind only a longing for those moments of grace that would allow me to mentally step back, moments of observation and contemplation. I operated as a camera and tape recorder, jotting down fragments of descriptions, conversations, and experiences, flashes of thoughts and insights, without lingering on any of them, so they wouldn't dissolve into this intensive reality filled with contradictions. The enormous, almost illogical amount of events squeezed into a short timeframe bestowed a dream-like quality onto what was actually a very tangible, earthy reality, in the face of which I could do nothing but note this and press on.

BACK IN TEL AVIV, with the 2014 war ongoing, my eight-year-old son and I were returning from day camp one afternoon. I calculated our steps from one building to the next, planning where to run if the sirens sounded.

"How was camp today?" I asked, as usual.

"Fun," he answered, also as usual, and added: "We played IDF against Hamas." Heartrendingly nonchalant, unintentionally ironic, he recounted how some of the children were the Israel Defense Forces and others were Hamas. They threw things at each other, took cover, and simulated the sounds of sirens and explosions with their voices.

"And who won?" I asked.

"No one," he replied simply. "After a while we got tired," he explained, "so we stopped."

In war, as in summer camp, at some point the sides get tired and stop – even though when the fighting is over, the reality that (ostensibly) led to the war remains unchanged.

Only the amount of sorrow in the world has increased.

IN THIS BOOK, as in my previous books, I write in an effort to understand. Translating reality into text is my primary way of contending with reality. For as long as I can remember, I've never really understood something until I found the words to describe it. And in this book, as in my other books, I write in order to challenge reality. In writing, freedom is infinite, and it's possible to disrupt what seems to be immutable.

However, there was an additional motive for writing this book, one engendered by a sense of distress, along with an awareness of something else. A thick and sticky distress grew from the realization that despite my active affiliation with the Left, my very existence in Israel makes me part of the conflict, part of the system that sustains it, one of those who must be held accountable and bear responsibility for it. As for the awareness, this I can't prove – as it is based on moral, historical, and perhaps also literary intuition – but nevertheless I am as certain about it as I can be about anything: groups aspire toward self-determination and equality, and over time they ultimately realize these things; oppressive regimes are destined to disappear, and religious psychoses run out of steam. A day will come when we, our children, our grandchildren, or their children will look back on the conflict we're living in today as a thing of the past. The only question is how much time will pass and how much blood will be spilled in the meantime. And at that future moment, those who lived through the conflict will ask themselves – and will be asked – what their moral stance was, and whether they even had one, and if they did anything to change their reality.

My encounters with South Africa and Rwanda, two societies that had undergone reconciliation processes, intensified my awareness of the folly of the conflicted existence that contains our lives. It left me stammering and bewildered, and brought me to write this book, which is a collection of my personal impressions and those of the people I met there who are still contending with the very personal challenges that reconciliation has posed and continues to pose. Through observation, reflection, and conversation, I seek to learn the meaning of reconciliation, identify its components, and understand which are essential to its actualization. By peeling away what is nonessential, I aim to isolate the characteristics that are common to the very dissimilar societies of South Africa and Rwanda, but which are lacking in Israeli society. Perhaps – hopefully – they'll offer us a clue.

In the final chapter, "Reconciliation After October Seventh," I revisit these notions and ask the terrifying and obvious question: Is reconciliation possible after everything that's happened since October Seventh?

1

A Consciousness Cast in Conflict

WHEN WE THINK OF A CHILD who has been abused, we take certain things for granted. It is obvious to us, for example, that such a child will have difficulty thinking of an adult in terms of protection and that he might, when he himself is an adult, reproduce the same patterns with his own children. When we think of a battered woman, we assume that this woman understands the relationship with her partner in terms of reward and punishment and that she might, to one extent or another, feel that she deserves the treatment she receives. When we think of a person who grew up and lives in a nondemocratic society, we assume that this person will be less inclined to think independently and critically, and that he also tends to accept outrageous realities as a matter of necessity.

Experience and research tell us what common sense knows: harsh realities constrict, narrow, and cloud consciousness.

And yet we are slow to apply this understanding to those who were born, raised, and shaped in a society steeped in conflict. We are slow to apply this understanding to ourselves. Perhaps because, like an abused child, a battered woman, or someone living under a dictatorial regime, we too are imprisoned in the limits of our constricted, narrowed, and clouded consciousness, to the point that we cannot grasp that such is our situation.

So what does a consciousness cast in conflict look like, and what does this mean for our ability to perceive our situation and the possibility of changing it? Common sense suggests, at

least to some extent, that the form of our consciousness reflects the conflictual reality of which we are but a part. Conflicts differ in their content: they can be religious, racial, territorial, national, or a combination. However, all conflicts have formal traits in common: a *separation* between "us" and "them"; an *object* toward which both sides aspire; and an explicit or implicit assumption that the only possible relationship between one of the parties and the object is that of *exclusion*. These forms are seared into a consciousness that is a product of conflict. They become the patterns through which reality is perceived.

P is a science teacher at a boarding school in Cape Town, South Africa. During the ten days I stayed at the boarding school, I had the opportunity to see him teaching his students, listening to them and advising them. On the margins of the days, we talked about his dream of making art, the obstacles reality places before that dream, and his sense of mission as an educator. He hoped to rise above the curriculum's rigid demands and pass on to his students some of what he learned from a dedicated professor, a man who taught him how to think beyond the tyranny of those thought patterns he had absorbed from his environment. Even when he reached adulthood and became an activist in the fight for equal rights and a member of the African National Congress's teachers' union, he found it difficult to think outside the racial categories on which he had been raised. "Whites were better than colored people and colored people were better than black people. That's how it was. Everyone knew it. I don't think my parents ever asked themselves if that's how things *needed* to be, and I accepted this division as something natural. We were colored, this defined us, and that was that. Even as we opposed discrimination, we thought within this division."

To think *within* such a division means that obedience has seeped into the patterns dictated by the conflict – into thinking, neutralizing the mind's most precious asset: its independence. Is this not horrific?

This, however horrific, is not an exhaustive description of a consciousness produced by conflict. After all, this describes a situation in which *some* thinking, however weakened, still occurs about something that can be *seen*, in this case the existence of black, colored, and white people in the country. And this thinking includes the common-sense assumption that some kind of relationship exists between them. But – and this is so embarrassing to recognize in retrospect! – there is much we can't even pretend to think about, because our compliance with these conflict-produced patterns won't let us. At the very least, such patterns hinder our effort to see things fully. We don't see things we don't want to see, because seeing them would completely undermine the way we perceive ourselves and the group to which we belong: family, society, country. In other words, a consciousness produced by conflict protects itself from reality and functions as a gatekeeper in the face of it. And if some fragment of that which is not to be seen slips through, it exists in our consciousness free from that larger "forbidden" and "dangerous" context. And so we treat that fragment as a separate, independent, and random particle, not as part of some bigger, significant phenomenon that deserves our attention.

S, a slender, elegant woman, spoke with me about this acquired blindness. She's in her fifties and works as a teacher and social activist with the poor black population, one plagued by drugs, alcohol, and crime, in the streets of Cape Town, South Africa. With her well-kept blonde bob, pencil skirts, and stiletto heels, she looks like a character who has accidentally found herself placed inside the wrong painting. In all of my conversations with her, I found myself looking for this artist, who has since left the scene, in order to ask him: "Excuse me, but didn't you confuse this?" However, as she saw it, the one who placed her in this painting was God, who in his goodness gave her the opportunity to atone – in her life, in her deeds, in every moment – for the injustices committed by white people during the apartheid years. More precisely, God gave her the

opportunity to atone not only for what other white people did in her name, because she was white, but also for the fact that she was entirely ignorant about all this. Because she could have known, had she made the effort.

"You see," she said to me with her big, watery blue eyes, sometimes moved to tears, though it was clear she was trying to emphasize that she's not the victim in her stories. "You see, I didn't know! I grew up on a farm in the Limpopo region, near the border with Zimbabwe. It's a really wild area, where lions roam, so people live on very large, well-protected farms. My father was a lovely man, a man of honesty and faith, and he treated the blacks who lived with us on the farm very well. Their children studied with us, with my brother and me, and with the private tutors who came to the farm. We didn't go to school. Our whole lives were there. And we played together, the children of the black workers and us, our whole childhood we were together. I didn't even know there was apartheid. I mean," she qualifies, "I knew that beyond our farm, which was really something of a bubble, blacks weren't treated as well as whites. But I didn't *really* know. I didn't know *how much worse*. I think my father tried to protect us," she said, tearing up yet again, "I think he didn't want us to know that there was such evil in the world. But when I grew up and went to university, I was shocked. One day a policeman came up to me and told me that I was walking on the wrong street, meaning a street designated for blacks. He was very polite and kind and spoke to me as if I had made a simple mistake and he was just alerting me to my mistake, for my own good, so that I could quickly return to the street for whites. He was right that I didn't know about such segregation, and he was right that I was walking there by mistake, but the moment I discovered my mistake, my life changed."

It's sad, even a little insulting, to see the imprint conflict makes on a consciousness, since we then must recognize that, to one degree or another, all of us are limited by these patterns. Most of us – even when trying to be "enlightened" – think with an "us" and

"them" dichotomy. Most of us see the very heart of the conflict in the piece of land so deeply coveted by both "us" and "them," and most of us struggle to imagine a situation in which "us" and "them" exist as equals on that same piece of land. Anything that doesn't conform to these thought patterns is doomed – as in S's case – to remain outside the boundaries of consciousness or to enter its gates only after being transformed beyond recognition.

But it seems to me that it is precisely these things – these fragments of human existence and this denied reality – that should interest us. Not only do they embody the price we pay, they also represent the end of a thread leading to a reality different from the one in which we currently bleed. Yet the end of this thread leads to something that lies beyond our consciousness, and there's the rub: our attempt to grasp it is in fact an attempt to grasp something unknown, analogous perhaps to the effort required to use a word that is "on the tip of one's tongue" or to hold on to a fragment of a dream in order to reconstruct it.

Although it is difficult to put one's finger on the exact nature of those things that are doomed to transform or disappear into an oblivion beyond our awareness, it seems possible to characterize them as threatening the "order," those rigid, opaque distinctions that have shaped the landscape of our consciousness. The humanity, uniqueness, and singularity of a private individual are obscured and sometimes erased completely by a consciousness shaped through conflict. The individual is left only with the characteristics of his "group," which gives these things greater weight. The process works in both directions: a person has difficulty seeing the other, his "enemy," and at the same time, in order to do this, he denies those humane, unique, and singular parts of himself.

But back to us Israelis, and to a little story that perhaps sums up the cognitive prison we live in. R, a senior surgeon and a lifelong peace and human rights activist, told me the following story with a combination of irony, self-deprecation, and perhaps even a little relief that stems from the realization

that the conflict has left its mark on him, too, and in such a way as to bring him closer to those he is trying to convince that coexistence in this place is actually possible.

"A fifteen-year-old boy came to the hospital seriously wounded," he said. "He was shot by the IDF while throwing stones in Nablus. Hello, I said to him, I'm your doctor. Where does it hurt? The boy wouldn't say a thing. His lips were pressed together, his pale face dotted with two jet-black eyes that burned with a fierce hatred. I could see all the world's hatred in them. Again I told him that I was his doctor and that I wanted to help him. Through clenched lips, the boy hissed just one word: jihad. I smiled at him and again asked what hurt. And again, the boy said only one word: jihad. The surgery was difficult and complicated and lasted all through the night." R continued to speak in the literary Hebrew of someone not born into the language but who nevertheless learned its subtleties and nuances. A kind of gratitude for this fluency, achieved with great effort, could be heard in his words. "The boy was saved." He let out a loud sigh, as if experiencing the relief all over again. "That morning, as I left the operating room, I met the boy's father, also a doctor. Unlike his son, he spoke English. He held out his hand to me. 'Professor, I will forever be grateful to you for saving my son's life.' We shook hands firmly and warmly. 'Your son is rather stubborn,' I said, telling him how his son didn't want to talk to us and would only say 'jihad' over and over again, and in fact refused to cooperate with us. The father thanked me again, and again said he owed me his life, but then he added: 'Professor, I am Ahmed and my son . . . his name is Jihad.' Look how impossible it is to escape from this," R said to me. "I, who define myself as a humanist and like to believe that all people are equal in my eyes, I fell into a stereotypical trap and heard what I expected to hear from a boy throwing stones at soldiers. That determined my interpretation, even though it turns out that Jihad has been a common name in Islam long before it was appropriated by those calling for a

holy war. It is the commandment to uphold the laws of Islam and spread the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad."

Perhaps the hardest part about all this is recognizing that a consciousness formed in conflict knows nothing else and therefore struggles to even imagine an alternative. Similar, perhaps, to the difficulty a person blind from birth has in imagining what the sky looks like. I recognize this in my children, who were born around the time of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination and in the years that followed, and in fact are not familiar with the feeling of hope. For the sake of accuracy and fairness, I should acknowledge that the years 1992–95 were full of hope for those who thought the Oslo Accords brought with them the possibility of peace, but full of anxiety for those who thought it was a recipe for disaster. Whatever the case, this was a period when the possibility of a different future still existed. My children and their contemporaries have never experienced life here as offering anything other than conflict, which is sometimes quieter and sometimes deafening. They have never tasted, smelled, or felt hope. All they have is what has been passed down to them through stories. So how can they aspire to hope? How can they change their fate?

Change is hard. It seems to me that the human capacity to change is born in moments when a person is given the opportunity to imagine themselves or their reality differently. Such moments tend to be rare and fleeting, but they provide a glimpse into what is typically unseen and perhaps even unimagined. Sometimes it's not even a glimpse, but only a vague feeling – of tenderness, of comfort, of breathing freely. However, once experienced, this sliver of insight exists, it's tangible, and one can – if one so chooses – attempt to recreate it and perhaps expand it to other realms of existence.

In this, I believe, lies the value of looking outward, of searching for such moments with those who have succeeded in thinking outside of the patterns that conflict creates, in imagining for themselves another life, one in which conflict is not simply a given.