

## The other side of Israel: My Journey Across the Jewish/Arab Divide

Susan Nathan

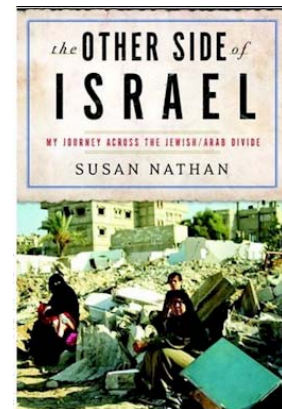
In The Other Side of Israel: My Journey Across the Jewish-Arab Divide, author Susan Nathan embarks on an endearing and contumacious journey while taking readers along for the experience. A British Jew who suffered the pangs of remnant anti-Semitism in post-war Britain, Nathan internalized the politics of Zionism and love for Israel from a young age, fuelled by the devastating memories of the Nazi holocaust. Throughout her journey readers learn of her Jewish identity and the pride fostered by her identification with the State of Israel's military prowess. "Here we were," she writes discussing her love of affair with Israel and its 1948 and 1967 victories over the Arabs, "a persecuted, isolated people, freeing ourselves from the ghettos of Europe and rising phoenix-like from the ashes of the gas chambers to become warriors." (Nathan, p. 43).

But Nathan's love affair changes as she immigrates to Israel in middle age. Nathan's Zionist perceptions heartbreakingly unravel as she learns that the land she loves and glories in was once inhabited by a people: an Arab people. It was not as the Zionist slogan portrayed: "a land without people for a people without land." This realization is greater enhanced by her discovery that the people who once belonged to the land called Palestine, had been forcibly expelled and brutally ethnically cleansed. To her horror she discovers that there exist those who somehow dodged the mass expulsion and ethnic cleansing of 1948 and became *de facto* citizens of the state that perpetrated the violence against them only to be known as "Arab Israelis."

Nathan's disenchantment with her childhood and lifelong Zionist narrative compels her to move to one of the dilapidated, unregistered and forgotten Arab Israeli villages called Tamra. Here, Nathan explores first-hand a world of oppression, segregation, and discrimination within the bounds of a state touted as "the only democracy in the Middle East." Tamra is not on the maps or registries – it is a non-village populated by non-people, legally considered "present absentees" by the State of Israel. Readers are introduced to her resident family and come to love them as she loves them – their sense of family and welcoming nature even amid severe discrimination. We smell the kitchen spices of Hajji, the widow matriarch of Nathan's host family, and we learn of how the Palestinian "other" lives in Israel. Amid constant threat of house demolitions by the Israeli government, Israeli secret service subversion, and social and economic uncertainty, readers learn of the fortitude of a little town and their people. Nathan describes weddings, festivals, and dances as she manoeuvres through the chaotic town.

The most interesting part of Nathan's book is the profound focus on the human dimension of the bitter ethnic divide between Arabs and Jews in the Holy Land coupled with her heart-wrenching portrayal of psychological, cultural, and physical Palestinian victimhood. The reader is constantly exposed to distinctions and historical parallels echoing the Jewish experience. Palestinians in Israel, not all too different from their Occupied compatriots, are constrained in hopeless ghetto life that she – as a Jew – would not experience in Israel. "Although I chose to

## Book Review



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live in Tamra,” she tell us at one point, “as a Jew I am always free to cross back over the ethnic divide. I think nothing of an hour’s train ride from Haifa or to Tel Aviv. But for them [Arabs] the trip involves crossing a boundary, one that is real as well as psychological.” (Nathan, p. 15). She goes on to illustrate the depths of the divide: “to be an Israeli Arab visiting a Jewish community is to be instantly a target, an alien identifiable through the give-aways of language, culture and often appearance.” As the book continues readers are introduced to her discovering the shocking Israeli practices of cultural oppression: denying Palestinian children their heritage; physically and figuratively erasing everything from the past that has shaped their present. The children must learn Hebrew, they must read Hebrew texts, they are officially forbidden from learning Palestinian history, their teachers are handpicked by the Israeli Secret Service, they are denied even the simplicity of the Palestinian flag.

Nathan’s remarkable ability to empathize with the ethnic other, the Arabs, is the most amazing and endearing aspect of this book. Through her journey, Nathan has challenged her misconceptions, her identity, her past, her friends and in so doing challenges readers to do the same. She boldly makes comparisons, not to entice, but to challenge. When a member of her host family, Samira, visits the city of Ein Hod in Israel where her family was expelled from decades earlier, she fearfully takes a visiting friend to her old house which is now inhabited by Jews. She knocks on the door, tells the inhabitants her story asking if she could enter and see her family’s old house along with her friend. However, the reaction is hostile and they are shooed away. Nathan boldly compares this to a story relayed to her by a longstanding family friend, a rabbi named Dr. John D. Rayner when he went to visit the house of his family in Berlin many years after expulsion and was welcomed by the German family residing there. “It occurred to me that the difference in the treatment of John and Samira spoke volumes about the difference of the readiness of these two nations – Germany and Israel – to acknowledge their respective pasts and make amends,” she fearlessly pens. “Whereas Germany had accepted its responsibility and atoned for the Holocaust, Israel was still pretending to itself and the world that the Nakba [tragedy of Palestinian expulsion and ethnic cleansing in 1948] had never taken place.” (Nathan, p. 117) Always responsibly positioned, the book is full of such poignant and moving comparisons.

The Other Side of Israel is a striking snapshot of the oppressed and enigmatic Palestinian community living in Israel. It is also an incredibly powerful drama as it captures a masterful example of the power of love, compassion and the triumph of the human spirit in the face of enormous adversity. A story of a woman daringly crossing a divide only to find in her supposed enemy the affection that exists within us all. Readers will be moved to tears, laughter, and back to tears in a journey that is sure to speak to the very core of the human soul.