

## Susan Nathan, author of *The Other side of Israel*

*In May, 2008, a CJPME staff writer called Israeli author Susan Nathan in Tamra, Israel and conducted the following interview. The CJPME-Montreal book club had recently discussed Nathan's book, and had been intrigued by her description of the discrimination against Arabs in Israel-proper. Nathan is an Israeli Jew who has been living in an ethnically Arab town in Israel for many years.*

**Q: In your book you talk about your past love affair with Zionism and your pride at the military prowess of Israel, especially after the 1967 war. You also talk about the attitude of your left-wing Jewish friends, who did not really have a favourable opinion of Arabs. How did you make the leap when you arrived in Israel? What compelled you to change your views?**

A: It wasn't difficult once I began to understand that I was educated in a mythology. Once you see it, you can't unsee it. Most Israelis see it but remain in denial. I came to understand that Israel was built on a war crime. I understood that was dangerous.

Also, it was about my values and ethics. I understood on a deep level that political ideology comes second to human values; I see human beings not ethnicity.

**Q: You write on pg. 14 of your book "Although I chose to live in Tamra, 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 to Tel Aviv. But for some the trip involves crossing a boundary; one that is real as well as psychological". Which do you think is worse, the physical or psychological divide?**

A: I think the psychological. After all, Jews came to Tamra for business or to visit me. We share all the public transport, universities, and everything but we live separately. The psychological divide is very serious and it comes from being brainwashed with Zionist ideology and mythology; and how the government uses it to build fear. There are a lot of Jews who will say they have Arab friends but they can't do what I've done [live with the other] and Arabs find it incredibly frustrating.

**Q: Reading your book, I felt that you really went out of your way to respect the local culture. For example on pg. 29 you write "Visitors to Tamra are shown great tolerance when they break...unwritten rules, but living here I decided it was important that I earned people's respect by showing them similar respect." Why did you feel this was important?**

A: I chose to make my life in the Arab world. This is not an anthropological experiment. I live an Arab life. If I were to go to Kuwait or Saudi Arabia I would be just as comfortable. I wanted to learn the culture, to express how it is similar with the Jewish culture, and it is similar. Many of the observances of the Arab world are similar to the Orthodox. I wanted to smash the lie [concerning the vast difference.] The biggest challenge managers of public policy in the West face is how to accommodate people with different backgrounds in the same geographical space as equal citizens. And Israel is no different.

Israel is a fragmented society but the government has a policy of exploiting difference—a policy of racism, not just Arabs, it's Ethiopians, migrant workers, Arab Jews...

**Q: Why?**

A: To maintain Zionism—white European, Ashkenazi.

**Q: You discuss what you call the "Culture of Violence" in Israel. How does this affect hopes for Arabs living in Israel?**

A: Everywhere there are guns. Young people go the Territories [Occupied Palestinian Territories] and they kill. It is very terrible stuff. It's the reality.

**Q: You talk about the destruction or active suppression of Palestinian culture and heritage by Israel. How do you feel this has affected the conscience of Arabs living in Israel?**

A: It has had two distinct effects. One, many young people are unaware of their roots and culture because they have parents who are afraid to talk about it. There is also a sense of shame about 1948. The other issue is that there are some who know about the Nakba [“Catastrophe” word used by Palestinians to describe their dispossession when Israel was created] and become politically active but suffer as a result. Overall, the government has a policy to keep them submissive and divided. That’s part of the policy of the government. It has had absolutely devastating effects.

Now we are in a dangerous situation in Israel. The government is trying to wipe out the word “Nakba” from the international community. The government used violence here recently, totally unprovoked attack on protestors wanting to commemorate the Nakba. You can not tell an ethnic group to forget their roots. You can’t tell the Jews to forget the Holocaust...

**Q: Your book is really like a mirror showing the Arabs but through yourself speaking to the Jewish experience. You draw many parallels. What will it take in your view, for more Jews to see their own history through Palestinian suffering; especially those in their midst?**

A: It will take another generation. For the immediate future, I’m pessimistic. In the long run, justice will prevail. I don’t think in my lifetime. Eventually I hope Israel will lead us to a disarmed Middle East union. It could be a dynamic place.

**Q: I want to turn now to how you are viewed in Israel.**

A: Same as everywhere else. People either love me or hate me. I have good, interesting friends, both Jewish and Palestinian. I just don’t bother about anyone else. I’ve never been a person who had to be liked. I’m me, you can take it or leave it.

**Q: What about your children and close family? Crossing an ethnic divide is not easy.**

A: It was hard for them in the beginning. I didn’t say to them you have to believe this or that. Very slowly they started to visit and read. Now they are supportive; you can’t push a political position down peoples’ throats. But they’ve changed their viewpoint radically [on their own]

**Q: I want to end by asking you about your criticism of the Left in Israel, what is the problem with the Left in your view?**

A: Left-wing Israeli Jews don’t want to look at the injustice here in Israel. It’s very cool to be anti-Occupation but the Occupation is over there, over the walls, you can still write [about the occupation] and hop to a café in Tel Aviv.

But we have a problem right here under our noses. There is a massive injustice here, people don’t want to change their lives here [in order to fix it.] What’s shocking about me is that I changed my life.