

Israel and Palestine. A cycle of revenge and counter-revenge. Futile and hopeless.

Can we understand why this is happening? Is there a way out?

The answers are Yes and Yes.

First, why is this happening?

The great Jewish principle of even-handed justice is summarised in the principle of *no more than* (those three words often overlooked) *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. It may be seen as a principle of even-handed retribution. What you do to me, I will do back. The principle has served many societies well for thousands of years.

The reason it works has to do with how society deals with violence in its midst. When societies fall apart they fall into violence. The degeneration of ex-Communist States into civil conflict is just the most recent example of a universal phenomenon.

Less obvious perhaps is that when societies regenerate themselves they do so with violence again. The difference is that this regenerating violence takes the form of scapegoating. A person or a group is identified as responsible for the violence in society, takes the blame, and is punished. In extreme cases, the scapegoats are murdered (as in Hitler's Jewish Holocaust). In other situations they are scapegoated symbolically by political isolation, jail or even "trial by media."

In Romania, for example, as the political leaders saw the danger of violence breaking down their control on society, they moved to scapegoat their own President and First Lady, Nicolae and Elena Ceaucescu. With breathtaking speed, they were tried, found guilty and executed.

And, for a time, peace prevailed in Romania. Why? Because every Romanian considered the Ceaucescus guilty. They were seen, not as the victims of a political manoeuvre, but as the ones uniquely responsible for the suffering and violence in that society. Whereas, as more recent commentators observe, they were actually both. Both scapegoats and guilty.

This insight, that perhaps the Ceaucescus were politically manipulated took a few years to emerge into the Romanian national consciousness. And when it did, it was introduced by Romanian expatriates—Romanians who had been living in America or elsewhere in Europe. Romanians who were able to observe their own culture from the liberating perspective of another culture.

Once the communication barriers between Romanians and the rest of the world broke down, the mythical structures that kept truth hidden also broke down. And soon enough, the ones who had swept into power in scapegoating triumph were democratically swept into opposition. At least, for a time.

In Israel and Palestine, the same mechanism is being attempted. Each side tries to scapegoat the other. The violence is always caused by the other side. Each murderous attack is always in revenge for a previous one.

But while the scapegoating mechanism seemed to work in Romania, it appears to be disastrously failing in Israel and Palestine. Why is that?

One reason that scapegoating does not work here is that we can hear the voice of the innocent victim.

In Romania, the Ceaucescus voice was silenced. We did not hear their defence. Only much later did we get a sense of their bewilderment and fear as they were summarily dealt with.

Thanks to the relative freedoms for communication in Israel—both for debate and propaganda—we get to hear the stories of the victims. During one visit I made to Israel in 1990 I crossed into the Gaza Strip within hours of an incident in which an Israeli off-duty soldier machine-gunned Palestinians standing at a bus stop. Today as I write this I wipe away tears from reading of the death of vacationing Israeli kids in a pizza parlour.

In both cases, it is the story of the victim that evokes pathos, anger and sympathy. Their pictures are on our TV screens and in our newspapers. But not only the dead and dying, also the Palestinian voices. John Highfield, on the ABC's "The World Today" lets us hear the speaker of the Palestinian Assembly, Abu Ala, as he walks in the early morning in the walled garden of his home anticipating the violence of the coming day.

Ala is a remarkably human voice. His anxiety penetrates into our heart: "I'm afraid that there will be some problems. Nobody sleep. Everybody is waiting. Looking, watching what's happening. ... And the other side, Israeli Army is calling 'Nobody move, curfew, don't move. Stay here. Don't put yourself in danger.' Something like that."

And on the Israeli side, another remarkably human voice is heard. Batsheva Goldenhirsh, a relative of the latest victims: "What were they doing? They were taking children for pizza on a fun day during vacation."

The more we hear the voice of the victim, the more the scapegoating mechanism is undermined. It is harder to blame the Palestinian when we hear his anxiety from his garden. It is harder to blame the Israeli when we hear how a normal day for any family was tragically altered.

More than any other single factor, it is the emergence of the voice of the victim that is emasculating the scapegoating processes in Israel and Palestine. The voice of the victim evokes sympathy. It reveals the sheer ordinariness of the victims, and the arbitrariness of the violence inflicted on them.

Soon enough, this sympathy for the victim builds into moral authority. It is the victim who takes the high moral ground. And the cynical violence of the oppressor is exposed.

The consequence of this process for the leaders of Israel and Palestine is proving disastrous. Their moral authority is steadily being eroded by the moral authority of those they hurt. The institutions that support their leadership are now suspect. Their authority is undermined. Faith in the institutions of society drains away. Religion is abandoned. Marc Ellis, a Jewish theologian visiting Australia recently, sees Israel as having abandoned the essentials of Jewish faith and sold out to secular ideas of power.

Which finally brings us to the second question: Is there a way out?

Well, there is. And it is already at work in both Israel and Palestine, even though for the moment, there is little news of it leaking out in those media more interested in the spectacle of revenge and counter-revenge.

Within both communities, and across the divide between the communities, there are people committed to peace. But not peace at the cost of destroying an enemy: peace through the process of recognising mutual pain and common hope.

Following the example of South Africa and peace movements at work in the Balkans, Rwanda and other places once thought hopeless, Israelis and Palestinians are beginning to engage in a revolutionary peace process.

It begins with truth telling. The stories of pain, fear and suffering must be told. On both sides.

Repentance and Justice follow. People need to say they are sorry for what they have done. Others need to hear it. Some kind of justice needs to address the sins of the past. Not retribution, although often it is hard to know the difference.

And then the magnificent moment arrives when, recognising their common victimhood, the people agree to put the past behind and to write a new and mutual future together. Development agencies call this “Building Local Capacities For Peace.” Marc Ellis calls it “revolutionary forgiveness.”

If there is to be peace in the Middle East, it will never come from the downward spiral of revenge and counter-revenge. It will only come from something more revolutionary.

Ironically, it was a Jewish teacher who originally pointed this out when he said, “You say an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”

Philip Hunt is a former CEO of World Vision Australia and Vice President for World Vision projects in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Email: Philip@philiphunt.com