BENNY MORRIS

Few figures in Israeli public life have done more to recover the historical truth of the fate of the Palestinians at the hands of the Zionist movement than Benny Morris, interviewed below. For several decades one of the leading historians of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Morris began his career—at a time when such research was still all but completely taboo in his own community—by starting to lift the veil on the ethnic cleansings on which the state of Israel was founded, in his ground-breaking work The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem *(1988). Undeterred by the ensuing odium, he continued his investigations with notable courage and independence of mind, going on to produce an iconoclastic study of Israel's subsequent border wars (1993), and unearthing further damning evidence of the premeditated expulsion of Palestinian populations by the leadership of the Yishuv ('Revisiting the Palestinian exodus of 1948', in Rogan and Shlaim, eds,* The War for Palestine, *2001). Morris is also the author of a major synthesis of the story of Zionist colonization and Arab reactions to it, from Ottoman times to the present:* Righteous Victims *(1999). The hallmark of Morris's work has been a tough-minded realism—the inclination of a former paratrooper for the IDF to call a spade a spade, whatever discomfort it might cause his co-nationals.*

These are the qualities that make the interview below, first published in the liberal daily Haaretz *on 8 January 2004, under the title 'Survival of the Fittest', a document of unusual significance in the modern history of Zionism—and reproduced here for that reason. To his shocked interlocutor, Morris lays out two unpalatable truths: that the Zionist project could only be realized by deliberate ethnic cleansing; and that, once it was embarked upon, the only reasons for stopping short of the complete elimination of the Arab population from Palestine were purely temporary and tactical ones. It is letting the second of these cats out of the bag that has led to most uproar among conventional opponents of the Likud and Labour establishments. Arguments for the wholesale ejection of the Palestinians from the Promised Land have long been openly expressed on the right of the Israeli spectrum, while more* sotto voce *justifications of ethnic transfers—typically invoking the expulsion of Ionian Greeks or Sudeten Germans as commendable examples—have freely circulated in labour and liberal circles, in Israel and the diaspora. But Morris's forthright judgement that Ben-Gurion made a fatal mistake in not also clearing the future West Bank of its Arab inhabitants comes with the*

unique authority of one still at work revealing hidden atrocities from the War of Independence. The same rigour that he has brought to Zionist war crimes he now brings to the underlying logic of Zionism—left or right.

In doing so, Morris—invoking Camus—here places himself squarely on the side of his community, whatever the disasters it has inflicted on the Palestinians that he has unsparingly recorded. In accompanying his arguments about the predicaments of Israel with the crudest stereotypes of Islamic and Arab barbarianism, Morris gave his critics an easy stick to beat him with. His comparison of the fate of the Palestinians with the positive example of the elimination of the native populations needed to build the United States could hardly be welcome to American Zionism, and Morris has been obliged to express his regrets on this point. Within Israel too, hubbub over such remarks has allowed attention to be deflected from the central issue raised by Morris's outspoken intervention.

For what it does is strike at the heart of the self-serving recipes for peace harboured by the overwhelming majority of Israeli opponents of Likud and Labour alike: the idea that a 'final settlement' which gives the Palestinians 18 per cent or less of the land they once inhabited is morally or politically defensible. Only on the cynically pragmatic grounds that the Jewish population of Israel will never yield a square metre of what it has taken, so the Palestinians should accept whatever remnant they can get, could such a solution be justified. But there is always a realism colder even than this one. On the same premises, the logic of Morris's position is impregnable. If the Palestinians can be battered down to a point where they are made to crouch helplessly within less than a fifth of the country, why not finish them off and expel the residue altogether? The merit of Morris's candour is to make it plain that the 'peace process' in all its guises—as multifarious as they are monotonous: Oslo, Camp David, Taba, Road Map or Geneva—is little more than war against the Palestinians by other means. The lesson of the interview is crystal clear. There are only two acceptable solutions to the Palestinian conflict: an equal division of the land between two communities that are now of roughly equal size, or the creation of a single state embracing both.

BENNY MORRIS

ON ETHNIC CLEANSING

Introduction and Interview by Ari Shavit

BENNY MORRIS says he was always a Zionist. People were mistaken when they labelled him a post-Zionist, when they thought that his historical study on the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem was intended to undercut the Zionist enterprise. Nonsense, Morris says, that's completely unfounded. Some readers simply misread the book. They didn't read it with the same detachment, the same moral neutrality, with which it was written. So they came to the mistaken conclusion that when Morris describes the cruellest deeds that the Zionist movement perpetrated in 1948 he is actually being condemnatory, that when he describes the large-scale expulsion operations he is being denunciatory. They did not conceive that the great documenter of the sins of Zionism in fact identifies with those sins. That he thinks some of them, at least, were unavoidable. Two years ago, different voices started to be heard. The historian who was considered a radical leftist suddenly maintained that Israel had no-one to talk to. The researcher who was accused of being an Israel-hater (and was boycotted by the Israeli academic establishment) began to publish articles in favour of Israel in the British newspaper, the *Guardian*.

Whereas citizen Morris turned out to be a not completely snow-white dove, historian Morris continued to work on the Hebrew translation of his massive work *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–2001*, which was written in the old, peace-pursuing style. And at the same time historian Morris completed the new version of his book on the refugee problem, which is going to strengthen the hands of those who abominate Israel. So that in the past two years citizen Morris and historian Morris worked as though there were no

connection between them, as though one was trying to save what the other insisted on eradicating.

Both books will appear in the coming month. The book on the history of the Zionist-Arab conflict will be published in Hebrew by Am Oved in Tel Aviv, while the Cambridge University Press will publish *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (it originally appeared, under the CUP imprint, in 1988). That book describes in chilling detail the atrocities of the Nakba. Isn't Morris ever frightened at the present-day political implications of his historical study? Isn't he fearful that he has contributed to Israel becoming an almost pariah state? After a few moments of evasion, Morris admits that he is. Sometimes he really is frightened. Sometimes he asks himself what he has wrought.

He is short, plump, and very intense. The son of immigrants from England, he was born in Kibbutz Ein Hahoresh and was a member of the left-wing Hashomer Hatza'ir youth movement. In the past, he was a reporter for the *Jerusalem Post* and refused to do military service in the territories. He is now a professor of History at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Be'er Sheva. But sitting in an armchair in his Jerusalem apartment, he does not don the mantle of the cautious academic. Far from it: Morris spews out his words, rapidly and energetically, sometimes spilling over into English. He doesn't think twice before firing off the sharpest, most shocking statements, which are anything but politically correct. He describes horrific war crimes offhandedly, paints apocalyptic visions with a smile on his lips. He gives the observer the feeling that this agitated individual, who with his own hands opened the Zionist Pandora's box, is still having difficulty coping with what he found in it, still finding it hard to deal with the internal contradictions that are his lot and the lot of us all. Rape, massacre, transfer.

Benny Morris, in the month ahead the new version of your book on the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem is due to be published. Who will be less pleased with the book—the Israelis or the Palestinians?

The revised book is a double-edged sword. It is based on many documents that were not available to me when I wrote the original book, most of them from the Israel Defense Forces Archives. What the new material shows is that there were far more Israeli acts of massacre than I had

previously thought. To my surprise, there were also many cases of rape. In the months of April–May 1948, units of the Haganah [the pre-state defense force that was the precursor of the IDF] were given operational orders that stated explicitly that they were to uproot the villagers, expel them and destroy the villages themselves.

At the same time, it turns out that there was a series of orders issued by the Arab Higher Committee and by the Palestinian intermediate levels to remove children, women and the elderly from the villages. So that on the one hand, the book reinforces the accusation against the Zionist side, but on the other hand it also proves that many of those who left the villages did so with the encouragement of the Palestinian leadership itself.

According to your new findings, how many cases of Israeli rape were there in 1948?

About a dozen. In Acre four soldiers raped a girl and murdered her and her father. In Jaffa, soldiers of the Kiryati Brigade raped one girl and tried to rape several more. At Hunin, which is in the Galilee, two girls were raped and then murdered. There were one or two cases of rape at Tantura, south of Haifa. There was one case of rape at Qula, in the centre of the country. At the village of Abu Shusha, near Kibbutz Gezer [in the Ramle area] there were four female prisoners, one of whom was raped a number of times. And there were other cases. Usually more than one soldier was involved. Usually there were one or two Palestinian girls. In a large proportion of the cases the event ended with murder. Because neither the victims nor the rapists liked to report these events, we have to assume that the dozen cases of rape that were reported, which I found, are not the whole story. They are just the tip of the iceberg.

According to your findings, how many acts of Israeli massacre were perpetrated in 1948?

Twenty-four. In some cases four or five people were executed, in others the numbers were 70, 80, 100. There was also a great deal of arbitrary killing. Two old men are spotted walking in a field—they are shot. A woman is found in an abandoned village—she is shot. There are cases such as the village of al-Dawayima [in the Hebron region], in which a column entered the village with all guns blazing and killed anything that moved.

The worst cases were Saliha (70–80 killed), Deir Yassin (100–110), Lod (250), al-Dawayima (hundreds) and perhaps Abu Shusha (70). There is no unequivocal proof of a large-scale massacre at Tantura, but war crimes were perpetrated there. At Jaffa there was a massacre about which nothing had been known until now. The same at Arab al Muwassi, in the north. About half of the acts of massacre were part of Operation Hiram [in the north, in October 1948]: at Safsaf, Saliha, Jish, Eilaboun, Arab al Muwasi, Deir al Asad, Majdal Krum, Sasa. In Operation Hiram there was an unusually high concentration of executions of people against a wall or next to a well in an orderly fashion.

That can't be chance. It's a pattern. Apparently, various officers who took part in the operation understood that the expulsion order they received permitted them to do these deeds in order to encourage the population to take to the roads. The fact is that no-one was punished for these acts of murder. Ben-Gurion silenced the matter. He covered up for the officers who did the massacres.

What you are telling me here, as though by the way, is that in Operation Hiram there was a comprehensive and explicit expulsion order. Is that right?

Yes. One of the revelations in the book is that on October 31, 1948, the commander of the Northern Front, Moshe Carmel, issued an order in writing to his units to expedite the removal of the Arab population. Carmel took this action immediately after a visit by Ben-Gurion to the Northern Command in Nazareth. There is no doubt in my mind that this order originated with Ben-Gurion. Just as the expulsion order for the city of Lod, which was signed by Yitzhak Rabin, was issued immediately after Ben-Gurion visited the headquarters of Operation Dani [July 1948].

Are you saying that Ben-Gurion was personally responsible for a deliberate and systematic policy of mass expulsion?

From April 1948, Ben-Gurion is projecting a message of transfer. There is no explicit order of his in writing, there is no orderly comprehensive policy, but there is an atmosphere of [population] transfer. The transfer idea is in the air. The entire leadership understands that this is the idea. The officer corps understands what is required of them. Under Ben-Gurion, a consensus of transfer is created.

Ben-Gurion was a 'transferist'?

Of course Ben-Gurion was a transferist. He understood that there could be no Jewish state with a large and hostile Arab minority in its midst. There would be no such state. It would not be able to exist.

I don't hear you condemning him.

Ben-Gurion was right. If he had not done what he did, a state would not have come into being. That has to be clear. It is impossible to evade it. Without the uprooting of the Palestinians, a Jewish state would not have arisen here.

Benny Morris, for decades you have been researching the dark side of Zionism. You are an expert on the atrocities of 1948. In the end, do you in effect justify all this? Are you an advocate of the transfer of 1948?

There is no justification for acts of rape. There is no justification for acts of massacre. Those are war crimes. But in certain conditions, expulsion is not a war crime. I don't think that the expulsions of 1948 were war crimes. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. You have to dirty your hands.

We are talking about the killing of thousands of people, the destruction of an entire society.

A society that aims to kill you forces you to destroy it. When the choice is between destroying or being destroyed, it's better to destroy.

There is something chilling about the quiet way in which you say that.

If you expected me to burst into tears, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I will not do that.

So when the commanders of Operation Dani are standing there and observing the long and terrible column of the 50,000 people expelled from Lod walking eastward, you stand there with them? You justify them?

I definitely understand them. I understand their motives. I don't think they felt any pangs of conscience, and in their place I wouldn't have felt

pangs of conscience. Without that act, they would not have won the war and the state would not have come into being.

You do not condemn them morally?

No.

They perpetrated ethnic cleansing.

There are circumstances in history that justify ethnic cleansing. I know that this term is completely negative in the discourse of the 21st century, but when the choice is between ethnic cleansing and genocide—the annihilation of your people—I prefer ethnic cleansing.

And that was the situation in 1948?

That was the situation. That is what Zionism faced. A Jewish state would not have come into being without the uprooting of 700,000 Palestinians. Therefore it was necessary to uproot them. There was no choice but to expel that population. It was necessary to cleanse the hinterland and cleanse the border areas and cleanse the main roads. It was necessary to cleanse the villages from which our convoys and our settlements were fired on.

The term 'to cleanse' is terrible.

I know it doesn't sound nice but that's the term they used at the time. I adopted it from all the 1948 documents in which I am immersed.

What you are saying is hard to listen to and hard to digest. You sound hard-hearted.

I feel sympathy for the Palestinian people, which truly underwent a hard tragedy. I feel sympathy for the refugees themselves. But if the desire to establish a Jewish state here is legitimate, there was no other choice. It was impossible to leave a large fifth column in the country. From the moment the Yishuv [pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine] was attacked by the Palestinians and afterwards by the Arab states, there was no choice but to expel the Palestinian population. To uproot it in the course of war.

Remember another thing: the Arab people gained a large slice of the planet. Not thanks to its skills or its great virtues, but because it conquered and murdered and forced those it conquered to convert during many generations. But in the end the Arabs have 22 states. The Jewish people did not have even one state. There was no reason in the world why it should not have one state. Therefore, from my point of view, the need to establish this state in this place overcame the injustice that was done to the Palestinians by uprooting them.

And morally speaking, you have no problem with that deed?

That is correct. Even the great American democracy could not have been created without the annihilation of the Indians. There are cases in which the overall, final good justifies harsh and cruel acts that are committed in the course of history.

And in our case it effectively justifies a population transfer.

That's what emerges.

And you take that in your stride? War crimes? Massacres? The burning fields and the devastated villages of the Nakba?

You have to put things in proportion. These are small war crimes. All told, if we take all the massacres and all the executions of 1948, we come to about 800 who were killed. In comparison to the massacres that were perpetrated in Bosnia, that's peanuts. In comparison to the massacres the Russians perpetrated against the Germans at Stalingrad [*sic*], that's chicken feed. When you take into account that there was a bloody civil war here and that we lost an entire one percent of the population, you find that we behaved very well.

You went through an interesting process. You went to research Ben-Gurion and the Zionist establishment critically, but in the end you actually identify with them. You are as tough in your words as they were in their deeds.

You may be right. Because I investigated the conflict in depth, I was forced to cope with the in-depth questions that those people coped with. I understood the problematic character of the situation they faced and maybe I adopted part of their universe of concepts. But I do not identify

with Ben-Gurion. I think he made a serious historical mistake in 1948. Even though he understood the demographic issue and the need to establish a Jewish state without a large Arab minority, he got cold feet during the war. In the end, he faltered.

I'm not sure I understand. Are you saying that Ben-Gurion erred in expelling too few Arabs?

If he was already engaged in expulsion, maybe he should have done a complete job. I know that this stuns the Arabs and the liberals and the politically correct types. But my feeling is that this place would be quieter and know less suffering if the matter had been resolved once and for all. If Ben-Gurion had carried out a large expulsion and cleansed the whole country—the whole Land of Israel, as far as the Jordan River. It may yet turn out that this was his fatal mistake. If he had carried out a full expulsion—rather than a partial one—he would have stabilized the State of Israel for generations.

I find it hard to believe what I am hearing.

If the end of the story turns out to be a gloomy one for the Jews, it will be because Ben-Gurion did not complete the transfer in 1948. Because he left a large and volatile demographic reserve in the West Bank and Gaza and within Israel itself.

In his place, would you have expelled them all? All the Arabs in the country?

But I am not a statesman. I do not put myself in his place. But as an historian, I assert that a mistake was made here. Yes. The non-completion of the transfer was a mistake.

And today? Do you advocate a transfer today?

If you are asking me whether I support the transfer and expulsion of the Arabs from the West Bank, Gaza and perhaps even from Galilee and the Triangle, I say not at this moment. I am not willing to be a partner to that act. In the present circumstances it is neither moral nor realistic. The world would not allow it, the Arab world would not allow it, it would destroy the Jewish society from within. But I am ready to tell you that in other circumstances, apocalyptic ones, which are liable to be realized in

five or ten years, I can see expulsions. If we find ourselves with atomic weapons around us, or if there is a general Arab attack on us and a situation of warfare on the front, with Arabs in the rear shooting at convoys on their way to the front, acts of expulsion will be entirely reasonable. They may even be essential.

Including the expulsion of Israeli Arabs?

The Israeli Arabs are a time bomb. Their slide into complete Palestinization has made them an emissary of the enemy that is among us. They are a potential fifth column. In both demographic and security terms they are liable to undermine the state. So that if Israel again finds itself in a situation of existential threat, as in 1948, it may be forced to act as it did then. If we are attacked by Egypt (after an Islamist revolution in Cairo) and by Syria, and chemical and biological missiles slam into our cities, and at the same time Israeli Palestinians attack us from behind, I can see an expulsion situation. It could happen. If the threat to Israel is existential, expulsion will be justified.

Besides being tough, you are also very gloomy. You weren't always like that, were you?

My turning point began after 2000. I wasn't a great optimist even before that. True, I always voted Labour or Meretz or Sheli [a dovish party of the late 1970s], and in 1988 I refused to serve in the territories and was jailed for it, but I always doubted the intentions of the Palestinians. The events of Camp David and what followed in their wake turned the doubt into certainty. When the Palestinians rejected the proposal of [Prime Minister Ehud] Barak in July 2000 and the Clinton proposal in December 2000, I understood that they are unwilling to accept the two-state solution. They want it all. Lod and Acre and Jaffa.

If that's so, then the whole Oslo process was mistaken and there is a basic flaw in the entire worldview of the Israeli peace movement.

Oslo had to be tried. But today it has to be clear that from the Palestinian point of view, Oslo was a deception. Arafat did not change for the worse, Arafat simply defrauded us. He was never sincere in his readiness for compromise and conciliation.

Do you really believe Arafat wants to throw us into the sea?

He wants to send us back to Europe, to the sea we came from. He truly sees us as a Crusader state and he thinks about the Crusader precedent and wishes us a Crusader end. I'm certain that Israeli intelligence has unequivocal information proving that in internal conversations Arafat talks seriously about the phased plan [which would eliminate Israel in stages]. But the problem is not just Arafat. The entire Palestinian national elite is prone to see us as Crusaders and is driven by the phased plan. That's why the Palestinians are not honestly ready to forego the right of return. They are preserving it as an instrument with which they will destroy the Jewish state when the time comes. They can't tolerate the existence of a Jewish state—not in 80 per cent of the country and not in 30 per cent. From their point of view, the Palestinian state must cover the whole Land of Israel.

If so, the two-state solution is not viable; even if a peace treaty is signed, it will soon collapse.

Ideologically, I support the two-state solution. It's the only alternative to the expulsion of the Jews or the expulsion of the Palestinians or total destruction. But in practice, in this generation, a settlement of that kind will not hold water. At least 30 to 40 per cent of the Palestinian public and at least 30 to 40 per cent of the heart of every Palestinian will not accept it. After a short break, terrorism will erupt again and the war will resume.

Your prognosis doesn't leave much room for hope, does it?

It's hard for me, too. There is not going to be peace in the present generation. There will not be a solution. We are doomed to live by the sword. I'm already fairly old, but for my children that is especially bleak. I don't know if they will want to go on living in a place where there is no hope. Even if Israel is not destroyed, we won't see a good, normal life here in the decades ahead.

Aren't your harsh words an over-reaction to three hard years of terrorism?

The bombing of the buses and restaurants really shook me. They made me understand the depth of the hatred for us. They made me understand

that the Palestinian, Arab and Muslim hostility toward Jewish existence here is taking us to the brink of destruction. I don't see the suicide bombings as isolated acts. They express the deep will of the Palestinian people. That is what the majority of the Palestinians want. They want what happened to the bus to happen to all of us.

Yet we, too, bear responsibility for the violence and the hatred: the occupation, the roadblocks, the closures, maybe even the Nakba itself.

You don't have to tell me that. I have researched Palestinian history. I understand the reasons for the hatred very well. The Palestinians are retaliating now not only for yesterday's closure but for the Nakba as well. But that is not a sufficient explanation. The peoples of Africa were oppressed by the European powers no less than the Palestinians were oppressed by us, but nevertheless I don't see African terrorism in London, Paris or Brussels. The Germans killed far more of us than we killed the Palestinians, but we aren't blowing up buses in Munich and Nuremberg. So there is something else here, something deeper, that has to do with Islam and Arab culture.

Are you trying to argue that Palestinian terrorism derives from some sort of deep cultural problem?

There is a deep problem in Islam. It's a world whose values are different. A world in which human life doesn't have the same value as it does in the West, in which freedom, democracy, openness and creativity are alien. A world that makes those who are not part of the camp of Islam fair game. Revenge is also important here. Revenge plays a central part in the Arab tribal culture. Therefore, the people we are fighting and the society that sends them have no moral inhibitions. If it obtains chemical or biological or atomic weapons, it will use them. If it is able, it will also commit genocide.

I want to insist on my point: a large part of the responsibility for the hatred of the Palestinians rests with us. After all, you yourself showed us that the Palestinians experienced a historical catastrophe.

True. But when one has to deal with a serial killer, it's not so important to discover why he became a serial killer. What's important is to imprison the murderer or to execute him.

Explain the image: who is the serial killer in the analogy?

The barbarians who want to take our lives. The people the Palestinian society sends to carry out the terrorist attacks, and in some way the Palestinian society itself as well. At the moment, that society is in the state of being a serial killer. It is a very sick society. It should be treated the way we treat individuals who are serial killers.

What does that mean? What should we do tomorrow morning?

We have to try to heal the Palestinians. Maybe over the years the establishment of a Palestinian state will help in the healing process. But in the meantime, until the medicine is found, they have to be contained so that they will not succeed in murdering us.

To fence them in? To place them under closure?

Something like a cage has to be built for them. I know that sounds terrible. It is really cruel. But there is no choice. There is a wild animal there that has to be locked up in one way or another.

Benny Morris, have you joined the right wing?

No, no. I still think of myself as left-wing. I still support in principle two states for two peoples.

But you don't believe that this solution will last. You don't believe in peace.

In my opinion, we will not have peace, no.

Then what is your solution?

In this generation there is apparently no solution. To be vigilant, to defend the country as far as is possible.

The iron wall approach?

Yes. An iron wall is a good image. An iron wall is the most reasonable policy for the coming generation. My colleague Avi Shlaim described this well: what Jabotinsky proposed is what Ben-Gurion adopted. In the

1950s, there was a dispute between Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett. Ben-Gurion argued that the Arabs understand only force and that ultimate force is the one thing that will persuade them to accept our presence here. He was right. That's not to say that we don't need diplomacy. Both toward the West and for our own conscience, it's important that we strive for a political solution. But in the end, what will decide their readiness to accept us will be force alone. Only the recognition that they are not capable of defeating us.

For a left-winger, you sound very much like a right-winger, wouldn't you say?

I'm trying to be realistic. I know it doesn't always sound politically correct, but I think that political correctness poisons history in any case. It impedes our ability to see the truth. And I also identify with Albert Camus. He was considered a left-winger and a person of high morals, but when he referred to the Algerian problem he placed his mother ahead of morality. Preserving my people is more important than universal moral concepts.

Are you a neo-conservative? Do you read the current historical reality in the terms of Samuel Huntington?

I think there is a clash between civilizations here [as Huntington argues]. I think the West today resembles the Roman Empire of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries: the barbarians are attacking it and they may also destroy it.

The Muslims are barbarians, then?

I think the values I mentioned earlier are values of barbarians—the attitude toward democracy, freedom, openness; the attitude toward human life. In that sense they are barbarians. The Arab world as it is today is barbarian.

And in your view these new barbarians are truly threatening the Rome of our time?

Yes. The West is stronger but it's not clear whether it knows how to repulse this wave of hatred. The phenomenon of the mass Muslim penetration into the West and their settlement there is creating a dangerous

internal threat. A similar process took place in Rome. They let the barbarians in and they toppled the empire from within.

Is it really all that dramatic? Is the West truly in danger?

Yes. I think that the war between the civilizations is the main characteristic of the 21st century. I think President Bush is wrong when he denies the very existence of that war. It's not only a matter of bin Laden. This is a struggle against a whole world that espouses different values. And we are on the front line. Exactly like the Crusaders, we are the vulnerable branch of Europe in this place.

The situation as you describe it is extremely harsh. You are not entirely convinced that we can survive here, are you?

The possibility of annihilation exists.

Would you describe yourself as an apocalyptic person?

The whole Zionist project is apocalyptic. It exists within hostile surroundings and in a certain sense its existence is unreasonable. It wasn't reasonable for it to succeed in 1881 and it wasn't reasonable for it to succeed in 1948 and it's not reasonable that it will succeed now. Nevertheless, it has come this far. In a certain way it is miraculous. I live the events of 1948, and 1948 projects itself on what could happen here. Yes, I think of Armageddon. It's possible. Within the next twenty years there could be an atomic war here.

If Zionism is so dangerous for the Jews and if Zionism makes the Arabs so wretched, maybe it's a mistake?

No, Zionism was not a mistake. The desire to establish a Jewish state here was a legitimate one, a positive one. But given the character of Islam and given the character of the Arab nation, it was a mistake to think that it would be possible to establish a tranquil state here that lives in harmony with its surroundings.

Which leaves us, nevertheless, with two possibilities: either a cruel, tragic Zionism, or the foregoing of Zionism.

Yes. That's so. You have pared it down, but that's correct.

Would you agree that this historical reality is intolerable, that there is some-thing inhuman about it?

Yes. But that's so for the Jewish people, not the Palestinians. A people that suffered for 2,000 years, that went through the Holocaust, arrives at its patrimony but is thrust into a renewed round of bloodshed, that is perhaps the road to annihilation. In terms of cosmic justice, that's ter-rible. It's far more shocking than what happened in 1948 to a small part of the Arab nation that was then in Palestine.

So what you are telling me is that you live the Palestinian Nakba of the past less than you live the possible Jewish Nakba of the future?

Yes. Destruction could be the end of this process. It could be the end of the Zionist experiment. And that's what really depresses and scares me.