

Osie Gabriel Adelfang

Editor

osie@OsieOnline.com

www.OsieOnline.com

Introduction by **Cindy Sheehan**

Forward by **Amira Hass**

Includes essays by

**Jen Marlowe** (*Darfur Diaries*), **Anna Baltzer**  
(*Witness in Palestine*), **Starhawk & Hedy Epstein**



# Shifting Sands— Q&A with Osie Adelfang

**Q: What was the biggest misconception that you had prior to learning the truth about how Israel took the land from the Palestinian people?**

OGA: Definitely, absolutely, that we came in peace to a sparsely populated land, and that it was Arab anti-Semitism that caused (and continues to fuel) the conflict. The history that is taught to Israeli kids and was, at least back then, reinforced in my Jewish-American upbringing, is based on a mythology that is not only wrong, but was purposely and knowingly created as propaganda by early Zionists. That was a very painful thing for me to learn: not only had I based my cultural pride on lies, but they weren't just misinformation but deliberately created to instill in me those feelings. I felt like a patsy, and I grieved for the part of me and my family's history that was based on this invented story. So I would say that it was more than a 'misconception,' which sounds pretty benign. It was part of my sense of self. Admitting that your entire understanding of an issue—which you have deeply believed and was wound into your sense of self is wrong—is really difficult to do. I totally understand (though I am frustrated by) my arguments with Zionist Jews. I get it. But at some point you have to face the truth. Doing so does not, in the end, take away your Jewish identity or place in the world. In the long run, moving toward the truth, and then taking action for justice, is an amazing, joyful shift. I hope this book helps people move through their emotions on this issue along with the authors and understand that they are not alone.

**How did you find out the truth about what is going on?**

My parents (like many Israelis, I think) were "leftie," as they say in Israel. They were opposed to mistreatment of the Palestinians in theory, but they fell prey to many of the same myths: that Arabs hated Jews, that they were violent, irrational people, that Israel's government was, in the end, the moral superior. We moved to the US in 1974, and I know I grew up with their message that the occupation was wrong, but also that (and I think, again, that this is a common Israeli attitude) it was all "too complicated" to resolve and was as bad for the Israelis as it was for the Palestinians. My path to an interest in the truth and to learning it is detailed in my *Shifting Sands* contribution, "Loved is a Person." My Israeli cousin was a major influence. I saw him on a trip there in 1995, when he was a tank commander of 26 and very hopeful about the peace process. He told me at that time that he had refused to fight in the territories and his officers had honored his decision and placed him elsewhere. My next visit to Israel was my honeymoon, it was a pretty peaceful moment in time (especially for me!) and I don't remember talking much about the occupation. My cousin took my new husband to see the memorial for the fallen and told him the story of the War of Independence that led to this memorial. When asked if that is what he thinks really happened, he shrugged and said, "That is the story of this monument."

After that trip, I was focused on work, being married, being pregnant, becoming a mom. Then I had a second daughter who died at 4 hours old. So Israel/Palestine was not in the forefront of my thoughts. In fact, this caused some friction between my other cousin and me, as she felt I should have been more concerned and attentive to her during this time of escalating violence of the second Intifada. She was probably right, but that is where my head was at in that time, very close to home and family. In 2002, though, Haim called me and asked me if I'd translate a letter for him. That was when I found out he'd been one of the original 50 "refuseniks," soldiers who had written a letter, signed it, and posted it on the Internet as "The Combatants Letter." They were breaking a huge taboo in Israel, where military service is mandatory and a feeling of nationalism and participating self-defense is part of your being—saying they would refuse to serve as an occupying force. They called their website "Courage to Refuse."

I read the testimonies on that website and I was shocked. It's not so much that I didn't know...it's like knowing there is famine in Africa and then seeing a video of a starving mother trying to nurse her starving infant—two different experiences. One was in the back of my mind, and one confronted me directly. My cousin's letter (which I translated as a Letter to the Editor that was printed in the *UK Guardian*), was very thought-provoking, and courageous, and I felt I owed it to him to at least find out more. The more I read (and you have to find your own sources and determine their reliability, this is definitely an issue where the plethora of info out there is not necessarily up-to-date, accurate, or unbiased), the more upset I became. I was extremely proud of my cousin's refusal, and I wished there was more I could do to help, but I was raising babies and far away and so I sort of put the issue on the shelf for a while, other than contributing to peace groups when I was able.

I talk elsewhere about the inspiration for the book, but I want to add here that even when I began to create it, I knew so much less than I do a year later. My contributors educated me a ton. First of all, through their eyewitness accounts. But also because many are activists, many have spent a lot of time in Palestine, and in phone and email conversations I got a very thorough education about the Israeli occupation, its history, the present day crisis, and likely (and unlikely) scenarios for the future. There was so much I'd never contemplated before, like, is Zionism a flawed philosophy at its core? I was raised to believe in a Jewish homeland and had never really contemplated until a year ago whether a religious state—in this case my religion—could ever truly be free or democratic. I am still learning daily.

**How did you find your contributors? How did you decide which essays to include in the book?**

I cover some of this in the "inspiration" fact sheet. I did what most editors of anthologies do: I put out calls for submissions in as many outlets as I knew of and could afford (i.e., they were free!). I told friends and asked them to tell their friends. I wrote a piece myself, I set up a website, and I approached a few of the contributors directly because I knew their reputations and their writing.

**You are the editor and you wrote one of the essays: What is your history as a writer and editor?**

I grew up writing. It's pretty much the only thing I remember getting a lot of encouragement for doing, from my parents and a few teachers, and that probably further pushed me in the direction of deciding to be a writer. In high school, I definitely had this feeling that I would be able to become a journalist and change the world. Sadly, I figured out that wasn't likely to happen about a month into journalism school. I still liked writing and editing, though. I went into magazine editing after college because...well, honestly because after nine months of waitressing, a publishing company came to campus to recruit. I wasn't highly motivated, or rather; I didn't have a direction I was too eager to follow at that point.

I loved working on magazines (these were trade magazines—"business to business"—nothing like fashion or consumer glossies!). The pay was terrible but I really enjoyed the whole process of putting together this whole package: writing, editing, laying out the articles, choosing photos, writing blurbs for the cover. It was like doing a giant puzzle every month. You knew how big it was and how many pieces, but it was different every time. I realized that unlike many writers I knew, I didn't have the discipline to write every day, and also that I got a lot of enjoyment out of editing, out of putting the puzzle pieces together in a way that created something special.

I also talk in the "inspiration" fact sheet about how I came to decide that I wanted to create an anthology—that idea came to me before the idea of making it about the occupation. I looked back on those days of magazine editing and I thought, I would love to do the whole process again, beginning to end, to create a "whole." I wasn't about to start a magazine, but the idea of an anthology appealed to me, I could write a bit and edit the whole, putting the puzzle together the way I envisioned it should be.

Being able to merge the two things—a deep desire to make even a small contribution to peace and the dream of creating an anthology—was the most amazing opportunity and gift!

**Seeing the trends in humanity, I find it difficult to believe that there is one "innocent" party. Do you believe that attacks by Hamas on Israelis are justified while Israel's actions (withholding basic life needs from the Gazans) never are?**

I'm going to address what I see as two different points: If violence justified (and if so, when) and which side is justified. As a rule, I don't believe violence of any kind leads to anything but more violence. You have to be peaceful to achieve peace. So no, I don't see any attack (especially on civilians) as justified. Soldiers have at least signed up for the job. The facts are, however, that Israel has killed thousands of innocent Palestinian civilians in the past 10 years, while only a dozen (equally innocent of course) Israelis have been killed by suicide bombers: It's kind of like plane crashes: They are awful and dramatic—so from watching the news, you'd think airplanes were extremely dangerous. Whereas of course there are very few plane crashes and car crashes kill people every day, you just don't hear about it. I guess I'm making an analogy where air travel is the Palestinians (so many Jews really believe that a whole population of amazing human being is inherently "dangerous," because that is what they see in the media. And the Israeli government/military is like your everyday, every hour car crash. It happens so much no one makes a note of it, and no one wants to think about how dangerous it really is, because they need to feel safe with it.

Despite violence not being a road to peace, wouldn't many of us be driven to violence at some point? If someone hurt our children? Killed our siblings? Would we be justified were we to choose to take the law into our own hands and take revenge? Or to protect ourselves from certain death by killing another? So if you put me on the spot, I'd say that neither side is justified but the Palestinians are not only less guilty, but also have been more wronged and have fewer options. Another analogy: To make an analogy: Was it wrong of Black Panthers to carry out several violent acts in the U.S.? Was it "as wrong" as the enslavement of millions? "As wrong" as segregation? "As wrong" as unpunished lynchings? Which side hurt more people? Which side's fault was it that the situation was created and existed for so long?

And for the analogy Jews hate, but there you go: During the Warsaw ghetto uprisings, were the Jews wrong to act as "terrorists" because violence is wrong? If both sides were violent during the uprising, were both sides equally wrong?

I do think it's important though to differentiate between violent attacks being justified and one side's position being justified. Because I think that one side is clearly justified. Israelis are living comfortable lives, traveling the world, working and studying, moving freely through their own lives, while Palestinians are living as refugees, in inhumane conditions, subjected to daily humiliations, beatings, prison or death. Because the fact is, as Ben Gurion himself said, we stole their land.

Despite the official Israeli party line, its leaders know and support the long-standing real reasons behind the situation as it exists today—regardless of how the reasons are portrayed in the media or in Jewish education or to the Israeli people themselves. The situation was created purposely (and this is historical facts written by Israeli historians, based on verifiable evidence) by the pre-Israeli Zionists and continues because of the policies of generations of Israeli leaders. It's amazing how long the Israeli government has been able to play the "victim card" when Israel is the world's fourth largest military power and the Palestinians are refugees without any military power greater than the bodies of their young men. If you look back at historical documents (again, I'm talking Israeli historical documents) there is no doubt that the early Zionists had no intention of sharing the land and manipulated every situation they could to get rid of the country's native population. Do you know there is proof they have studied Nazi documents regarding defeating the Warsaw ghetto uprising in order to learn how to defeat the Intifada? The fact that we see this situation as a "conflict" not an "occupation" is, in itself, proof of how well this manipulation and propaganda has worked for all this time.

**What do you see as the most likely solution to this situation? What would be the most just and peaceful solution in your opinion?**

I feel like it's important to start by saying that it's not my place to dictate a solution—that is for the Palestinians and the Israelis. My personal opinion is that any country that is based on one religion is going to discriminate against anyone not of that religion. I don't see how a Jewish country can be democratic if its laws are different for people who are or are not Jewish. According to the U.S., "separate but equal is inherently unequal."

Also, by (very strategically—check out Alice Rothchild’s essay, “The Monsters Are Taking Over”, in the book) breaking up Palestinian areas of the West Bank and settling so much of it, the Israeli government has rendered a two-state solution obsolete. Where would the Palestinian state BE?

So since you’re asking MY opinion, it is that the only just and peaceful solution is to share the land in an Israel/Palestine that is a secular and truly democratic state. When people say it wouldn’t work, there is too much anger, too much hatred; I would say that I live in the Deep South, that in my city, the public schools weren’t integrated until 1973! My dad lived in North Carolina in the ‘60s, and every time he’d come visit me in AL in the 90s, he’d say: “I can’t believe integration actually happened down here, you wouldn’t believe what things were like 30 years ago! I never thought it would work, we all thought there would be so much more bloodshed.” And look at South Africa. I may be wrong, but I really believe that most people, as long as they could have a decent life for themselves and their families, would prefer to live side by side in peace, and that those that would not (who were too filled with hate, and I think this applies to the settler-types, who have become lawless bullies), would become cowards the moment they weren’t backed by the world’s fourth largest military power and quietly recede into the shadows if they knew their party was over. Bullies without external sources of power become pathetic cowards.

**And finally, after having done all of the research and having written this book, how are you left feeling? Are you able to feel hopeful, or is there some sad resignation to the possibility that people are so hateful that there is no chance for peace?**

The editing process, when I was sitting with these essays all day, was a very surreal experience. The stories are so powerful and so sad, I felt like I was spending half my day in Palestine, totally involved in what I was reading and editing. Then I’d walk away from the book and play with my kids, or go to Target, or talk to friends, and I had no one to talk to about what I’d “witnessed” that day, about the feelings I was having, because they were living in Huntsville full-time, in suburbia, and nothing was wrong. I had a lot of nightmares about being chased by young Israeli soldiers through tunnels and cities. All different but the same. So that’s how I was feeling when I lived with this stuff daily. I can’t even imagine how the people feel who truly ARE living this reality daily. I can’t imagine they are very hopeful, it’s not like things are moving in the direction of peace and reconciliation.

That said, I do have hope, I have to. Because if I didn’t, I would give up, and we can’t afford to give up, we have to assume we CAN have peace and the Palestinian people can be free or else we just turn our backs and leave them to a terrible fate. So we have to hope in order to keep going and so we can inspire hope in more people and they can keep going, and then, yes, if enough people see the truth and demand change, demand freedom and justice for the Palestinian people, then it would happen. Therefore, by having hope, you create the possibility of peace. So I see hope both as an act of faith and as a political act.

Resignation, though, is an interesting word choice, because that somehow implies to me that I’d be accepting some type of status quo, and the situation isn’t stable enough to sustain a status quo. When I was a child in Israel, I remember all the Palestinians that worked in Jerusalem...now, the Gazans can’t go anywhere, Israel is importing laborers and not

allowing Palestinians from the West Bank access to work or to their own farmland. In Israel/Palestine, there are five million Israelis and 5 million Palestinians. The Palestinians, well, look at the most recent maps and explain how all these tiny areas, barricaded behind a 24-foot wall, hold five million human beings who are suffering daily, but they are not ghettos. And in Gaza under siege, Gazan kids can't leave to attend college, men can't leave to make a living, people can't leave to get medical aid or food or to get away from falling bombs. That is a huge shift from "mere" apartheid (different laws for Palestinians and Jews) to ghettos. The people of Gaza are being starved; they are being denied water, medicine, shelter. How is Gaza today different from a concentration camp? Because we didn't fight back and some of them did? And so the feeling I have isn't a resignation to apartheid, but rather a very deep and terrible fear of what comes next. Once you have rounded the "problem" people up and walled them in, what is the next step?

Possibly, the next step will be a final "solution," but if the Israelis think genocide is going to buy them peace in the world, they are very mistaken. That's where the will to hope comes in. Because hopefully, the next step will be liberation, reparations, the Palestinian people's return to full citizenship and freedom in their own country, and reconciliation.