

## **Imagine if Jews were locked away behind concrete walls for 11 days**

**Netanyahu seals the gates of the West Bank and Gaza, confining millions of Palestinians, to enjoy the Sukkot festival. If anyone else demanded a Jew-free holiday, would we shrug that off?**

By [Marilyn Garson](#) | Oct. 8, 2017 | 5:40 PM

My team in Gaza were especially fond of one brand of Israeli honey cookies. We gorged whenever we spotted them, a Hebrew label among the Arabic. I dawdled over that label one morning, imagining Hebron settlers sipping coffee with Gaza strawberries.

My colleague misunderstood my reverie, and helpfully reminded me, "It's just a cookie. It's not politics." The settlers with the red-stained fingers vanished.

Living in Gaza, the rest of the world could look absurd.

Newt Gingrich, an American politician, disparaged Palestinians as "[an invented people](#)". A Gazan colleague flounced into my office. Hands on hips, she demanded, "Isn't everybody invented?"

Israelis and Gazans had such basic, human things in common. At funeral after funeral, they both said, "Those boys were everyone's boys. I have lost one more son."

Some people preferred the safe distance of binary distinctions. One Tel Aviv taxi driver insisted, "We can't live together because we're human beings and they're not."

When we cannot even imagine living together, we underestimate all the creativity, the money, the technology and infrastructure, and the hard work that has gone into keeping us apart.

We slip down the self-referential slope: it's all about us. We see only our suffering and our reasons, and we brandish the license of our losses. History becomes a litany of gestures made to straw men, who inexplicably rejected each one because they only understand violence. How could we live with straw men like that?

So the leaders of two nations with long memories wait for the other to forget, or be punished enough, or just go away.

Israel insists on its good motives but cannot ascribe the same to Palestinians. Palestinians are judged by their actions, overlaid with malevolent intentions.

Israelis at home are civilians; Palestinians in their homes are human shields. Dead Israeli civilians are victims of terror, while dead Gazans can only be collateral damage, because the IDF has its purity of arms. An IDF poster from the 2014 war [made it simple](#): Israel uses weapons to protect civilians, while Hamas uses civilians to protect its weapons. There's no living with people like that.

These are not the first belligerents to lie, or to wilfully refuse to see the humanity of the other side. As a [witness in Gaza](#) from 2011 to 2015, I was outraged by the asymmetry and the tactics of this conflict, and the failure of imagination – but I'm not Israeli. And I'm hardly the first Jew who has waded through the fission-fusion-fission reaction of recognizing Israel as a state rather than as a religion.

I was left with the dismay I might feel if my sister erupted in repeated, violent road rage. I didn't do it. However, she is a part of me. The name on the warrant is also mine.

So it is, when Israel's elected government attaches Judaism to its apparently inalienable right to dominate. In the name of religion, they withhold from others precisely the human rights that we Jews claim for ourselves. Their religious appropriation makes us more than witnesses.

Netanyahu seals the gates of the West Bank and Gaza [for eleven days](#), to enjoy Sukkot. How flagrant, to confine millions of people in the name of a holiday that celebrates the flimsy, temporary nature of our walls.

If Jews were herded behind concrete walls and locked away for eleven days, so that someone else might enjoy a Jew-free holiday, would we shrug that off?

We tolerate a nationalism which withholds from others precisely the political rights that we claim for ourselves. Have we forgotten that statelessness was the problem statement of Zionism? Jews felt vulnerable and voiceless in a world comprised of states – yet we avert our eyes from the stateless peril of others.

We accept the straw men they show us. If Jewish nationalism requires this domination, we assume that Palestinian aspirations must be as lopsided. Their rights would necessarily be realized at our expense, wouldn't they? We leave every better possibility unexamined, because we have already decided that we cannot live together. We've been primed.

Naturally, Netanyahu is preventatively foreclosing on Palestinian reconciliation.

We've seen this. In 2014, this was one of the last way-stations before a calamitous and (according to Israel's State Comptroller) [avoidable war](#). First there was no Palestinian interlocutor who could deliver all of Palestine. Then, overnight, at the prospect of reconciliation, there was no acceptable Palestinian interlocutor because someone might represent all of Palestine. The risks of war are more tolerable than the risks of compromise.

Why do we permit it? Netanyahu invokes the spectre – they all want to kill us. They always, only, want to kill us. That's why we can't live together, because Israel's strength is the only Jewish safety. Be very afraid. Build walls. Then build more walls.

The Global Militarization Index ranks [Israel as the most militarized country](#) on earth, a distinction it has held for 17 of the past 25 years (Israel was ranked second from 1999 – 2006). Israel has

imprisoned itself, and still finds it necessary to [spend another \\$800 million](#), on yet more walls, to hide itself from immiserated Gaza.

So, um, are we safe yet?

No. There is no separate safety in our entropic time. Jews, and everyone else, will become safe in a tolerant world, when Jews enjoy the same rights as those human beings behind the walls.

Call all this brick-laying 'Israeli', if that is what you want 'Israeli' to mean. But do not call it Jewish, because oppression is not the content of Judaism. Value life, and resist its waste. Seek justice – that is the content I understand. We are failing at it.

*Marilyn Garson lived and worked in Gaza from 2011 – 2015, as the Economic Director of Mercy Corps and the Business and Livelihoods Consultant to UNRWA. She is a co-founder of the [Gaza Gateway](#) social enterprise. She now writes from New Zealand. Her blog is [Transforming Gaza](#).*