

## Only the horses are uninvolved

Nurit Peled-Elhanan

Hebrew University of Jerusalem (retired)

### ABSTRACT

We know nothing about the people of Gaza. As far as Israelis are concerned, the residents of Gaza are categorized according to their status in the 'war': involved or uninvolved. Involved means condemned to death. Uninvolved means still living, until classified otherwise or until s/he dies. However, it seems that the term 'uninvolved' was invented as a rhetorical gimmick, to prove there are no such beings in Gaza.

### Keywords

Gaza, classification of people, rhetoric, involved, uninvolved, 'others'

In one of the reports about the 'war' in Gaza on the right-wing TV channel 14, the reporter surprised his audience by announcing that there are also 'uninvolved' in Gaza. He laughed heartily with the joy of a magician about to pull a rabbit out of his hat. Then he showed a reel where "our soldiers whose heart is the biggest in the world" found some uninvolved beings and gave them water to drink. The reporter insisted that these uninvolved innocent beings were thirsty even before the war and our brave soldiers rescued them, saved them from death.<sup>1</sup> These 'uninvolved' were horses.

Why was this an important item? According to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1989), to gain the right to exist, every component of the reality of dominion must justify itself in terms of its utility in the order imposed by the ruling power. In Gaza, nothing has the right to exist unless its existence is useful to the conquering Israeli power. The horses were proof that our moral, benevolent soldiers have the biggest heart in the world. Such big-hearted soldiers cannot and would not commit an unnecessary evil. The people of Gaza, Palestinians and pro-Palestinians, are of no use to the conqueror, neither before nor during the 'war', and evidently they will be of no use after the war. Unlike the horses, they are not entitled to a glass of water.

Zionism, as a European national movement, adopted the Western values of liberalism and humanism, along with the perception that "there is that which is human and then there is the 'other'" (Bekerman and Zembylas 2018, 59). Through processes of othering, many humans have been considered not to belong to that which is human. The 'human' is obviously the powerful, and the 'other' is the weak, who is often defined as eastern or 'oriental.' The powerful

“attain the status of essentiality while the weak are reduced to the rank of ‘an unfortunate but necessary accident’” (59). For example, in Israel, all the Palestinian citizens are labelled “the Non Jewish sector” or “the Non Jewish population”. They do not have a semantic field of their own but depend upon the semantic field “Jewish”. Hence their existence is always already negative. *They are not*. Jewishness is the only trait that interests the Israeli bureaucracy, army, police and economy. It is the Archimedes point from which and in relation to which these ‘others’ are classified. Any other feature or quality Palestinian citizens may have is of no interest. For instance, in a geography schoolbook we find: “The Arab population in Israel: this group includes various religions and various ethnic groups: Muslims, Christians, Bedouins, Druze and Circassians. But since most of them are Arab we shall label all of them Arabs or the Arab population” (Fine, Segev, and Lavi 2011, 12). The classification or the generic name annuls the particularity of each of the mentioned groups, implying that they are all the same since they are all ‘non-us’, non-Jews, and this is the only thing that matters. They lack the essential trait that can turn one human, which is Jewishness, therefore whatever else they are is of no interest to us.

The perception that there are ‘us’ and there are the superfluous ‘others’, which has nourished the rich imperial Western history of massacres, and served antisemitism, has also served Zionism in many ways, and informs Israeli perceptions today. Palestinians do not exist and have never existed in the Israeli discourse as humans. In order to legitimate the siege, the expulsion or the starvation policy to the soldiers, to the citizens and to schoolchildren, they have been transformed into abstract entities such as a ‘problem,’ like the Jewish problem was in Europe. In schoolbooks they are called ‘the Palestinian problem’, a demographic problem, a security threat, etc.

The people of Gaza, from a new-born child to the oldest grandfather, are classified in two categories: involved or uninvolved. This is the classification Israel uses in its war against the public opinion of the world, that scolds it from time to time regarding the undifferentiated killing that has been going on for almost a year in Gaza. The reproach of the world does not change a thing. Gazans are being killed because they are there, on the land that Israel wants to turn into a pure Jewish territory. Involved, uninvolved or not uninvolved, the people of Gaza are neither civilians nor warriors, neither poor nor rich, neither old nor young, neither educated nor ignorant; there are no doctors, teachers, artists or scientists in Gaza. The whole population of more than two million people is either involved or uninvolved in the war Israel is waging on them.

The classification of people characterizes discourses that are not interested in the individual, the particular, in his or her qualities or actions, only in their function or status. Such discourses aspire to coalesce people under one common trait, and they do it by means of general nouns, usually abstract ones. Advertisement, education, the army, the market, and

branches of psychology coalesce individuals through classification, turning each member into a sample of a category, where his/her name is used only for purposes of identification. That which remains of the individual only identifies him or her as a sample of the category: blond, black, gay, child, woman, soldier. The power to classify is in the hands of the dominant people who can turn human beings into one feature, which is not of their own choosing. In the swimming pool, visitors are defined as “shoe-wearers” and special signs are addressed to them as such. Nothing else about them interests the signs? (Kress 1995). At school, as the marquis de Sade reminds us, children are classified according to age and mental virginity, and nothing else interests the classifiers. All the members of the category are equal before the bureaucrat, the colonizer or the exterminator, as we are all equal before God or Covid-19 (Dahan 2021).

Classifications are typical of racist discourse, used in colonial regimes that conceive of the particular and the minority only as ‘others,’ a dangerous ‘out-group’ or at least an obstruction on the way to their absolute dominion or to the perfect state. The imposition of categories is meant to deprive the subjugated people of their collective and private identity and erase their existence as social actors (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 63). Hence, classification is a bidirectional instrument of ordering the world and controlling it: “control over the flux of experience of physical and social reality [...] and society’s control over conceptions of that reality” (Hodge and Kress 1979, 63). Thus, classification creates “a kind of second-order reality, a version of reality,” determined by the interest and ideology of the classifier (VL 2008, 46). For that purpose, “[i]deological articulations such as racism, nationalism, sexism, ethnicism, verge on one another, are connected and overlap.” These ‘isms’ are meant first and foremost “to protect the interests of the dominant in-group and reinforce the de-legitimation of ‘others’ mainly through exclusion” (Wodak and Reisigl 2001, 21).

Just as Jewishness is the essence of existence in Israel, so ‘involvement’ is the essence of existence in Gaza. The uninvolved are defined by their lack of involvement, which is the norm, the default. They are the deviant, defined by relation to the ‘involved,’ and this relation can easily change according to the whims of the classifier. Usually the term ‘involved’ is passive, but it can be active. Someone who is involved in a car accident can be the victim or the perpetrator. The ministry of Education asks parents to be involved at their children’s school, but not to interfere. In the case of Gaza, involved is a negative term and uninvolved is a positive one. The ‘un’ is perceived as positive, as a license to live, because involvement means death.

Who are the uninvolved, those who are not active in the war but are exposed to danger? Those who are allowed to live until the classifier decides they are involved? How old are they? What do they look like? How can you tell? These are the things Israeli media take care to conceal from the eye and from the ear. The uninvolved must be kept anonymous, inhuman items of a category, because, as Bauman said (1989), in dealing with categories, the rules that

dictate human behaviour towards other humans do not apply, neither ethical nor moral considerations need to be taken into account. No empathy should be felt towards the category of uninvolved and no “empathic unsettlement” (LaCapra 2001) should be felt in talking or writing about them, their suffering, their starvation or their death. Their otherness is total, absolute. Empathic unsettlement is a position of recognizing the suffering of others, regardless of their circumstances and the reasons or conditions of their suffering. But one cannot feel any empathy toward categories because categories do not suffer. Humans do, although there are exceptions. Sometimes empathy is aroused toward a whole category, provided it is ‘our’ category, our imagined community, for instance ‘the abducted.’ The whole Israeli population is crying, grieving, demonstrating, demanding day after day the release of ‘our abducted’ men, women and children who were kidnapped by Hamas and are held captive in inhuman conditions in the Gaza strip. However, in order to arouse compassion, pity, and horror, we hurry to give the members of our category faces, life histories, qualities, so they remain individuals and enable empathy. The horses have faces as well, beautiful ones. But the uninvolved and the involved should never have faces, should never look nice. They are reduced to this one feature: +/- involvement. And the same people who cry and protest for the release of ‘our’ captives, whom they have never met or known before but have gotten to know and feel close to only through their photographs and stories, these same people can feel no empathy whatsoever toward the thousands of Palestinian children who were killed in Gaza, the thousands of wounded and the thousands of starving children, because these children have no faces in Israeli media. They are the ‘others,’ involved or uninvolved. They are not us, not ours, not as human as our victims. Israeli reporters are not allowed to call them victims even after their death. Instead, they join another category – collateral damage. And nobody asks or explains what the damage is and why nearly 20,000 dead children are collateral.

Israeli education inculcates an aversion toward everything ‘oriental’ namely ‘Arabs’ and is geared to convince Jewish children that the whole category of Arabs threatens the very existence of Israel, whether they are involved or uninvolved. Palestinians are called animals or Amalek, the mythical biblical eternal enemy of Israel, who must be wiped off the face of the earth according to the Torah: “Remember what Amalek did to you along the road when you came from Egypt, [...] you shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget” (Deuteronomy 26, 17).<sup>2</sup> This commandment is constantly repeated by Netanyahu and members of his government as well as by Rabbis, politicians and the general public. The command is to wipe out the Amalekites and their seeds, namely their children and grandchildren. This can explain why Israel executed Henya’s grandchildren, because ‘seeds’ are not the adults only but the babies as well, as Israelis MPs, such as May Golan, keep telling us.<sup>3</sup>

The formal definition of uninvolved is: a person who finds himself in a war zone or a conflict but does not participate actively. Who defines what ‘actively’ means? Israeli experts, politicians, artists and journalists from the left and from the right side of the political map, keep debating what ‘actively’ means, namely what makes a person of any age death-bound. They draw polls that prove that most Palestinians and Gazans are not uninvolved,<sup>4</sup> although other polls prove that most of them are not Hamas supporters. But the preferred polls are those that prove that all those who voted for Hamas 20 years ago, those who support Hamas loudly and those who support Hamas quietly, in their heart, those who do not rebel against Hamas (how exactly?), those who do not raise a white flag and those who do, those whose house serves as shelter to Hamas warriors or to arsenals of weapons, those who do not cooperate with the Israeli army, those who participated in the construction of the tunnels, those who cheered the October 7<sup>th</sup> massacre of Israelis, those who did not denounce it, in short, all the people of Gaza and the West Bank are the seeds of Amalek,<sup>5</sup> as our soldiers sing wholeheartedly.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, the term ‘uninvolved’ serves as a rhetorical gimmick, only to emphasise that there are no uninvolved people in Gaza. This gimmick is used by the media, by politicians and in the general social discourse. It was invented in order to negate it, to say, with the Israeli president, with Israeli defence minister, and with Israeli musical idols such as Idan Reichel: “one must treat all Gazans as involved” (Froim 2024), before signing their names on the bombs that were destined to kill “all Gazans.”<sup>7</sup> ‘Uninvolved’ is a term used in laws of warfare. According to civil laws one is either guilty or innocent. These terms presuppose innocence, clean hands, honesty, integrity. But involved and uninvolved do not. It doesn’t matter whether Palestinians are innocent, honest, righteous or not. They are just involved or uninvolved. Only the Palestinian victims of Hamas, those who serve as human shields, are labelled innocent, in order to intensify Hamas’s criminality, but the moment they are killed by Israeli soldiers they become not-uninvolved at best. In contrast, Israeli abducted civilians and Israeli abducted soldiers are treated as innocent victims, not guilty of anything. Schoolbooks, and the media have never differentiated between Israeli civilians and soldiers. They are all ‘our innocent children.’ The soldiers of one of the mightiest armies in the world are thus transformed into that helpless persecuted Jews once again, context notwithstanding. ‘Un’ is stronger than not. ‘Uninvolved’ is a noun, indicating essence, permanence. ‘Not involved’ is an adjective and nouns are always stronger, more enduring than adjectives (Halliday 1993).<sup>8</sup> However, Palestinian Gazans are transformed from uninvolved to involved on the whim of the classifier. According to journalist adv. Aviad Visoly from the right-wing Channel 7 (14 December 2023), even the buildings in Gaza are not uninvolved and therefore they should be demolished, razed to the ground, as they are. Mosques, hospitals, including the new-born departments, residential areas, schools and universities.

All these definitions are speculative, bear no evidence, but they stem from a very profound and longstanding conviction that every Palestinian, or Arab for that matter, is a real or potential exterminator of Israel. Ever since they received this role after Israel befriended ‘the other Germany’ in 1953, ever since PM Ben Gurion declared he accepted the reparations money from Germany in order to protect Israel from the Nazi Arabs that are waiting to exterminate us (Segev 2019). Calling Palestinians Arab Nazis is meant to blur the Palestinian particularity and distinguished existence even more and conflate them with all the other Amalekians. As Minister of defence Gallant asserted: “I want to say to those European leaders who criticize us: the State of Israel and the people of Israel in 2023 are not in the year 1943. We have the means and the obligation to defend ourselves, by ourselves, and that’s what we’ll do. We will not rest until we’ve carried out our mission, and carried it out so that Hamas is defeated” (The Times of Israel 2023). Equating the country’s Arab neighbours, its Palestinian citizens and its occupied subjects with Nazis serves president Hertzog to equate the uprising of October 7<sup>th</sup>, against decades of oppression and siege, to Nazi Antisemitic crimes (Goldberg 2024; Altman et al. 2024): “Not since the Holocaust have more Jews been murdered on one day [...] Not since the Holocaust have we seen such images of innocent Jewish mothers and children, teenagers and old women loaded into trucks and taken away into captivity” (Hertzog 2023).” President Hertzog is convinced beyond doubt that all Gazans are involved:

“It is an entire nation out there that is responsible,” Hertzog said at a press conference. “It is not true this rhetoric about civilians not being aware, not involved. It’s absolutely not true. They could have risen up. They could have fought against that evil regime which took over Gaza in a coup d’etat” (Blumenthal 2023).

Blurring the identities and the circumstances of Palestinian rebellion against Israeli siege and starvation by identifying them with German tyrants, comparing Hamas and the third Reich, erasing a whole-time span, from 1943 to 2023, helps presenting Palestinian subjugated subjects as almighty. They all become our exterminators and exterminating them all becomes self-defence, and whoever criticizes Israel is guilty of Anti-Semitism (Goldberg 2024). As for the children, they “brought it upon themselves” as MP Merav Ben Ari (Lapid’s party), declared<sup>9</sup>; indeed, former Mossad official says there are “no uninvolved civilians in Gaza.”<sup>10</sup> These children will grow up to become our exterminators as well. Thus, one historical enemy is combined with the other. Defence of one’s country becomes “a sacred mission endowed with the weight of the ultimate catastrophe” (Zertal 2005, 11). If Palestinians are not conceived to be mighty Nazis, then risking death while fighting them would not be all that heroic. This discourse of Nazification is frequently employed by officers and soldiers who are convinced that whatever they do to Israel’s occupied Palestinian subjects will deliver their country from a second Holocaust (see *Breaking the Silence*).<sup>11</sup>

Just as Israeli politicians ignited and stoked the sense of an imminent Shoah in the weeks leading up to the 1967 war, so did they, with the help of the press, equate the massacre of October 7, 2023, to a Holocaust. However, contrary to the 1967 war, in the latter attack, Israelis felt they were deprived of the privilege to die a heroic beautiful death and were indeed slaughtered like sheep. This feeling amplified the fear of a new Holocaust and facilitated identification with Holocaust victims, according to Israeli media and schoolbooks (Zuckerman 1993). Schoolbooks explain that Israelis, who always die a 'beautiful death,' were unable to understand or sympathize with Holocaust victims who died an ugly and degrading one, until they themselves felt that they were about to die an ugly, humiliating 'Holocaust-like' death at the hands of the Arab enemies and Palestinian terrorists. Only then could they gain a sense of their vulnerability and helplessness, or in other words, of their 'Jewishness'. The Israeli Jews who vowed never to resemble 'these other Jews' who perished in the hands of racist Germans without fighting back, are once again cast as the victims of murderous, hateful, and gratuitous attacks of Jew haters. The occupied oppressed Palestinians, who are generally depicted as primitive, vile, lawless and underdeveloped (Peled-Elhanan, 2012), have been transformed into almighty Nazis. In the words of the celebrated Israeli author, David Grossman,

The Israelis, the citizens of the strongest military power in the region, are once again, with strange enthusiasm, walling themselves up behind their sense of persecution, [seeing themselves as] vulnerable victims. The Palestinian threat – ridiculous in terms of the balance of power, but effective in its results – has returned Israel, with depressing speed, to the experience of living in fear of total destruction. This, of course, justifies a brutal response to the threat (Grossman 2002).

Those of us who dare see Gaza's civilians and children as uninvolved or as innocent victims, risk losing their jobs, their freedom and sometimes their life (see the case of the teacher Meir Baruchin [Ziv 2024] and Prof. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian [Ali Bweerat 2024]). However, according to this logic we, the bystanders, the taxpayers, those who are seemingly uninvolved in the slaughter in Gaza, are not really uninvolved. This slaughter is carried out with our money, in our name and in front of our eyes. There are no uninvolved among us, where Gaza is concerned.

And so, the horses alone are uninvolved.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> TV channel 14 (Now 14), 31 December 2023.

<sup>2</sup> See also Sharon 2024.

<sup>3</sup> May Golan, Knesset Council. 19 February 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Lewenthal, "Uninvolved'?! A new survey points to 83% support for the massacre among Judea and Samaria's Arab." JDNNEWS. 16.11.2023 [trans from HEBREW].

<sup>5</sup> Shlezinger, Y. "There are no uninvolved in Gaza. How good that our opinion is heard." Israel Hayom. [www.israelhayom.co.il\\_20.1.2024](http://www.israelhayom.co.il_20.1.2024) [trans from HEBREW.]

<sup>6</sup> "There are no uninvolved". Our forces raise the morale and send a message to Hamas terrorists: "אין אף אחד מעורבים" כוחותינו מרימים את המורל ושולחים מסר למחבלי החמאס: "בלתי מעורבים" (youtube.com)

<sup>7</sup> “Israel Is Paying the Price for Its Bigmouths.” *Haaretz*. 12.01.2024: <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2024-01-12/ty-article-opinion/israel-is-paying-the-price-for-its-bigmouths/0000018c-fa2b-dd94-a9cc-faeff2700000>.

<sup>8</sup> As King Saul thought about David who refused to come, “It is an incident and he is not clean—surely he is unclean.” Samuel 1, 20/26.

<sup>9</sup> A post on “X”, 16.10.2023. See also *Haaretz* 09.11.2023.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEZy7zVOjI8>. Accessed 18 November 2024.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/>. Accessed 18 November 2024.

## References

Ali Bweerat, Ameer. 2024. “Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian: Hebrew University Professor Resigns Due to ‘Zionism’s Hold on Israeli Universities’.” *The New Arab*, 30 August. <https://www.newarab.com/news/hebrew-university-academic-resigns-due-repressive-environment>. Accessed 18 November 2024.

Altman, Y., L. Shuv and D. Rot-Avneri. 12.02.2024. “Natanyahu against the Hague international “Pure Antisemitism. Attacks the only state the Jewish people has”. *Israel today* 12.02.2024. [www.israelhayom.co.il](http://www.israelhayom.co.il).

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1989. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Blumenthal, Paul. 2023. “Israeli President Suggests That Civilians in Gaza Are Legitimate Targets.” *Huffpost*, 13 October 2023. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/israel-gaza-isaac-herzog\\_n\\_65295ee8e4b03ea0c004e2a8](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/israel-gaza-isaac-herzog_n_65295ee8e4b03ea0c004e2a8). Accessed 18 November 2024.

Fine, Z., Segev, M., and Lavi R. 2011. *Israel, the man and the space. Chosen chapters in Geography*. Tel Aviv. Center for Educational Technology.

Froim, Yoni. 2024. “Idan Raichel on the residents of Gaza: ‘We must treat most of them as complicit’.” *Y Net News*, 21 January 2024. <https://www.ynetnews.com/culture/article/rj7ecaqfp>. Accessed 18 November 2024.

Goldberg, Amos. 2024. *And You Shall Remember. Five Critical Readings in Holocaust Memory*. Tel-Aviv. Resling. (Hebrew).

Grossman, David. 2002. “Israel Has Won for Now, But What Is Victory When It Brings No Hope?” *The Guardian*, 30 September: 3-22.

Halliday, Mak. 1993. “Towards a Language-Based Theory of Learning.” *Linguistics and Education* 5, 93–116.

Herzog, Isaac. 2023. “Israel’s President: Our Darkest Hour Casts a Shadow on the Entire World.” *Time*, 9 October. <https://time.com/6321967/israel-president-isaac-herzog-hamas-attack/>. Accessed 18 November 2024.

Hodge, Bob and Gunther Kress. 1979. *Language as Ideology*. Abingdon: Routledge and Kegan Paul Publishers.

Kress, Gunther. 1995. *Writing the Future*. Manchester: National Association for the Teaching of English.

LaCapra, Dominick. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sharon, Jeremy. 2024. “PM’s office says it’s ‘preposterous’ to say his invoking Amalek was a genocide call.” *The Times of Israel*, 16 January. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pms-office-says-its-preposterous-to-say-invoking-amalek-was-a-genocide-call/>. Accessed 18 November 2024.

The Times of Israel. 2023. "Gallant to world leaders: How can you 'preach morals to us at the height of combat?" *The Times of Israel*. 11 November 2023. [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/gallant-to-world-leaders-how-can-you-preach-morals-to-us-at-the-height-of-combat/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/gallant-to-world-leaders-how-can-you-preach-morals-to-us-at-the-height-of-combat/). Accessed 18 November 2024.

Zertal, Edith. 2005. *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*. Translated by Chaya Galai. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ziv, Oren. 2024. "How Israel Turned a Teacher Into a Traitor." *+972 Magazine*, 9 February. <https://www.972mag.com/meir-baruchin-teacher-arrested-traitor/>. Accessed 18 November 2024.

Zuckerman, Moshe. 1993. *Shoa in the Sealed Room: The Shoah in the Israeli Press during the Gulf War*. Tel Aviv: Zuckerman Publishing.

**Nurit Peled-Elhanan** (Hebrew: נורית פלד-אלחנן; born 17 May 1949) is an Israeli discourse analyst and semiotician, a retired professor of language education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, translator, and activist. She is a 2001 co-laureate of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought awarded by the European Parliament. She is known for her research on the portrayal of Palestinians in Israeli textbooks, which she has criticized as being anti-Palestinian.