

# Israel, Gaza, Monsters and the Abyss

## – humanity's self-immolating ideologies

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*Self-Immolation* (1884). Grigori Grigorievich Mjasoedov

The darkly tenacious and startlingly violent Israeli-Hamas conflict rightly continues to receive much historical and political comment and analysis. Less considered though, are the generating psychological hungers and anxieties that lie deep beneath.

What are these? And can such understanding help?

This wide survey explores.



*Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.*

*And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back at you.*

– Friederich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

*If you are planning revenge, first dig two graves.*

– Spanish proverb

Late December 2023: Israel and Gaza – enter a grim crescendo of right v right – morally self-justified, each create between them a nightmarish and vast abyss of monsters and graves, of mutilations and mutations. Flattened dwellings, crushed and broken bodies, the howls of pain, homeless starvation, grief or overwhelming bewilderment – all justified by the assailants. Paradoxically, each side claims it must attack pre-emptively to prevent the sadistic and murderous spoliation of the other. Both claim moral purity: they are liberating their own people.

Here in the UK, far from the actual physical damage, spokespersons of both sides soon angrily claimed preeminent and unimpeachable victimhood. Such primary sources of righteous anger then develop metastases – secondary and spreading contagions of polarising, incendiary moralism.

One essential story behind this grotesque and tragic denouement is long, tangled and historically exceptional – it can lead to deeper understanding, though certainly not justification. It is the Jewish peoples' millennia of dispersal, migrations, solidaritied resilience, and then their survival despite centuries of persecutions and expulsions. This culminated in the Holocaust – surely a uniquely scaled and organised trauma of deliberate racial elimination.

Meanwhile, over the centuries, their erstwhile Biblical-era neighbours, the Arabic peoples, settled into their historic lands without any such terrible dispersal and fragmentation. Neither Roman nor Ottoman Empires, for example, equivalently threatened their security of location or succession. In Palestine their lives continued mostly poor, traditional, agrarian, yet relatively stable under a succession of dominions. Throughout many centuries they would have been oblivious of the fate of their anciently-sited neighbours. This continued until the slow growth of the Jewish immigration among them, from the early twentieth century. This destabilisation became rapidly and extremely unmanageable after World War Two; most nations were very limited in their own offers of sanctuary.

Post-Holocaust what else could those (surviving) Jewish people do? And in *their* quest to migrate and build a secure society on their distantly-past home-territory, how would the then-present, long-established Palestinian inhabitants respond? And what about the (occupying) 'protective' Administrators – the British? Or their sanctioning authorities, the previously fledgling League of Nations, then the United Nations? How could they manage all this?

In retrospect, so many decades later, we can now see a lot of partially-sighted jostling, often disparate and desperate confusions; short-term expediencies; wishful diplomatic feints; primitive tribal claims and violent protectionisms... The follies arising from such a fear-full muddle are now surely understandable: probably no group or administration had ever been so rapidly challenged by such complexity of history and competing claimants. How could any of the participants then know the distant consequences of their edicts and insistences? The purblind imbroglio came

first, the frenzied calumnies would gather later.

As Amos Oz was to say:

*Two children of the same cruel parent look at one another and see in each other the image of the cruel parent, or the image of their past oppressor. This is very much the case between Jew and Arab: it's a conflict between two victims.*

*... my definition of a tragedy is a clash between right and right. [It is] a Greek tragedy about justice versus justice and often, unfortunately, injustice versus injustice.*

Yet Oz said this several years before such rough injustice became something very much more ruinously terrible. Yes, he warned of an internecine abyss, but at that time it might still have seemed, to most, a distantly horizoned shadow...

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What human understanding can we construct of this and, more generally, of history's innumerable examples of such goading righteously-yoked fixations, and then our 'justified' attempts to degrade or eliminate the Other?

A common explanation draws from Darwinian biology – throughout nature all creatures compete in their struggle to survive, procreate, colonise. Everywhere there are necessary and endless supremacy-struggles to eat, mate and occupy defensible space. This is clearly true from the simplest living organisms to we over-complex

humans.

This view of all nature – as red-in-tooth-and-claw or eat-or-be-eaten – can be said to be ‘teleological’: we can readily discern the advantageous purpose or goal of the change or behaviour to benefit either the individual or the species. Much of our human behaviour – including some of our most unattractive or brutal displays – are easily understood in large part as teleological.

Some, but not all.

While some human violence, destruction or deceit can be explained as serving teleological advantage, there are many that cannot: in particular our myriad forms of sadistic cruelty, self-harm, addictions, consumerism and agitated repetitions. These behaviours are so often determining of human fate, yet very rare in other animals. The insectivorous spider web-traps the fly to eat it, not (as far as we know) to demonstrate its superior nature or power; the defending, rutting alpha-male stag will attempt to drive off a challenger, but further pursuit of conflict or resulting death are very unlikely.

It seems that non-human creatures’ activities are largely confined to, and can be explained by, the teleological, and their nervous and communication systems are adapted for this. This is much less true of humans. For obscure reasons<sup>1</sup> evolution has bestowed Homo sapiens with a much larger brain than we need for merely feeding, breeding or defensible space.

Such mysteriously bestowed excess brain capacity is very much a mixed blessing, for

it comes with the involuntary generation of four near-universal existential anxieties, which then burden us with very complex responsibilities. These are:

**1 Death.** All humans from childhood are conscious of the inevitability of their death. This is very hard for us to accept or assimilate so we have many ways of projecting or deflecting this fascinated dread: death-defying heroics, death-denying grandiosity, death-displacing afterlife myths, and – most chillingly – death-dispensing: the illusion that by killing others we can *control* life and death.

**2 Aloneness.** We are aware of separateness – for each of us our consciousness and experience are unique. That solitariness can be intolerably painful unless we find a commonality of consciousness and experience with others. We must, therefore, continually build and maintain bridges to those others.

**3. Insignificance.** Our surfeit of brain activity, together with our many clever inventions, has enabled us to be aware of the vastness beyond our own lives, times and habitat – the possible infinitude of all that is not-us. We are cosmically insignificant. We can bear this best by making ourselves, at least, significant to others, and inviting reciprocation. Otherwise we are not just transient and alone, we have no purpose or significance.

**4. Meaninglessness.** Once we have developed, caretaken and procreated our physical selves, what is the purpose of our lives and our strangely evolved excess brain activity? What are they for? Humans seem the only creatures that must then create *meaning* to maintain cerebral integration and social cohesion. Our need to create meaning is often overwhelming, sometimes desperate. This accounts for the very different initiatives that can seem so alarming,

bizarre or nonsensical to others. The failure to meet this need leads to nihilism, sometimes suicidal. Conversely it can sometimes, to some, seem worthwhile to kill rather than suicide, to illusion meaning – a terrifying perversion of a basic need.

These four basic existential anxieties in humans are underpinned by our large brains' surfeit of memory and imagination – an excess capacity, again, that far exceeds our biological needs, our teleology. Together these excesses bestow humans' powerful capacities for both our self-made blessings and curses. The blessings are our inquiring sciences, our imaginative arts, our transcendent spirituality and empathy. The curses are the shadow of these: when our excess imaginations and memories cannot run free, but stagnate as toxic coagulates which then displace our contact with reality: what is *there*.

So it is that our unique human capacity – to imagine what is *not there* – can lead not only to our finest fictions and cleverest inventions, but also to our fixated and pullulating grievances, our displaced yet burgeoning mistrusts and scapegoatings, our insistence that a world that has never been there must be the correct one, our rage – either hot or cold – that the world out there does not accord with the one in our heads...

These, so often, are the birthplace of ideologies, our fixations ... our righteous fanaticisms.

If we cannot find positive answers for, and responses to, our haunting existential anxieties then our overlarge memories and imaginations will generate such toxic



coagulates. History is full of them: witches, verminous tribes, holy wars, sacred places, infidels, holy books and writs, biblical-myth based entitlements, Uber and Untermenschen, National Destinies... All these are feats of imagination which, contagiously, speciously, can seem to provide group answers to our existential anxieties: the righteous mission bonds us to others; makes us significant to, for and with them; prescribes a meaning for our lives ... and even, sometimes particularly, make death seem insignificant, even welcome – we die for a Thousand Year Reich, or a holy martyrdom, an eternal Father/Motherland or the reward of innumerable heavenly virgins. The historical recurrence and mass-appeal of such hypnotic charisma demonstrates both how powerful and widespread are such underlying anxieties and the irrational lengths we may go to to quieten them.

Such is the origin, nature and danger of our thralldom to grandiose and righteous ideologies.

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At the end of the Napoleonic Wars the French aristocrat-diplomat, Talleyrand, said amidst the negotiations: *'The important thing is that people do not feel humiliated.'*

This is a pithy and important insight into so many of our self-inflicted tragedies and misunderstandings, and links well with the basic existential anxieties – for the humiliated person feels powerless, insignificant, alienated from meaningful connection. Such experience of involuntary subjugation accrues resentment, and stored resentment is then fertile terrain for our over-large brains to conjure, then fixate on 'not theres': scapegoating, grandiose nationalisms, messianic leaders,

religious fundamentalism, tribal vilification... All of these are (usually unsighted) attempts to escape an unbearable pall of alienated humiliation.

The rise of Hitler and Nazism following the Versailles Treaty is probably the most cited example of the dangers of such a massed experience of humiliation, but there are many others. Most end-of-Empires are brought about by so-called 'terrorists' which are later viewed as the cowed and humiliated population's struggle for autonomy. All the western European colonising nations underwent these humbling diminutions of supremacy in the decades following World War Two.

The deliberately vaunted, shockingly violent, sadistically retributive Hamas attack on Israeli citizens in October 2023 is an example of this. And as such it is also a tragic denouement: a United Nations early statement correctly, but contentiously, said such an event had 'not arisen out of a vacuum'.<sup>2</sup>

Amos Oz wrote recurrently of the right *v* right tragedy of two legitimate claimants wanting sole possession of the same small territory. Yet that very difficult impasse is now immeasurably conflagrated and endangered by superadded righteous ideologies: the Israeli West Bank settlers<sup>3</sup> claim territorial imperative by their Biblical tales of anciently obscure history; Hamas reciprocally sees Israel as an illegitimate infidel-State that must be utterly eliminated as a religious imperative.

Only such rhetorically argued and hypnotically conveyed righteous ideologies can lead us to this internecine abyss. Other non-human species, lacking in our higher brains' inventive powers, instinctively know when to draw back. Teleology is never so mutually destructive.

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Yet there is a historical example of something very different; of Homo sapiens being truly wise in drawing back from the abyss. It is the USA's 1940s Marshall Plan – a creative and healing international political initiative of unprecedented effectiveness and beneficence. The story is certainly worth revisiting.

At the end of the Second World War the defeated Axis Powers lay in ruins. The gruesome destructive force by which this was achieved is graphically exemplified by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the firestorm bombing of many cities, including Dresden.

Those primary Axis powers had been historically unequalled in their mission to thoroughly demonstrate sadistic dominance over other races and nations, vaunting seemingly limitless power and demonstrate whims of massive cruelty. This is exemplified by the Holocaust and the Nanking Massacre. Both nations were in thrall to – driven by – righteous, religion-like ideologies. Both nations, in their nationalist-delusional fervour, declared war on the USA.

At the end of that war – by far the most destructive ever – came a startlingly fresh, compassionate and wise initiative: the Marshall Plan.<sup>4</sup>

Up until that time – 1945 – there is evidence from many centuries of unbroken protocol at the end of wars: the victors would determine punitive and retributive terms of surrender that the vanquished had to submit to. These terms consisted of

confiscated assets, territory, treasures and natural resources. Often labour or trade conditions were mandated in ways that rendered the vanquished a vassal State of abject servitude. The purpose, it seems, was not merely to exploit the vanquished, it was to demonstrably humiliate them.

There were some in the USA who saw clearly what such humiliation had wrought in Germany following the First World War and decided on a very different course: the Marshall Plan and its derivatives. These together decisively and promptly set about shepherding and protecting *de novo* democratic governments and administrations, funding the rebuilding of infrastructures, housing and industries and – very exceptionally – creating the parity-conditions so that trade and business could thrive within a decade.<sup>5</sup>

The results were rapid and remarkable. Both Japan and Germany had been widely feared for their quasi-religious, vehement and vindictive nationalism. Yet within twenty years of the Plan's implementation they became exemplars of international trading and diplomatic cooperation;<sup>6</sup> likewise their efforts to maintain peace, democratic integrity and racial tolerance.

It was as if Talleyrand – at last, for a while – had been seriously heeded.

All turned away from the abyss.

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Could that exceptional breakthrough of compassionate and far-sighted wisdom from

the 1940s be reincarnated now, in some form, to draw Israel and Gaza away from the abyss?

Of course there are differences between the current situation and that of the Marshall Plan era, but the similarities are what may be seminal: for example, the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbour, the shockingly sadistic treatment of their American prisoners, the many hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians then killed by American bombing of cities to assure unconditional surrender... Both sides had massive wounds and losses and could easily have trapped and incubated aggrieved senses of never-to-be-healed mistrustful humiliation and resentment.

Instead, the Marshall Plan drew back and boldly broke the cycle. This required very substantial concessions and gifts. Germany and Japan had to relinquish their quasi-religiously held national myths of racial superiority and strutting entitlement; the USA had to trust that this was possible, to cooperatively guide that transition and reparation, and to massively fund the process.

Few would now argue about the long-term gains in peace, economic prosperity and cultural enrichment from those gifts of faith and forgiveness.

For such a process to be now possible in the Middle East, similar boldness, trust and relinquishment is required. Israel must abolish all government and forced settlement on Palestinian territory, abjure all notions of Biblically predicated entitlement, and vigorously facilitate peaceful Palestinian autonomy in a two-state solution<sup>7</sup>.

Reciprocally, the Palestinians can only make this possible by ensuring they themselves are governed in a way that cooperates with this: the right of a peaceful

State of Israel to exist with permanently agreed, secure borders that must be made inviolable.

A positive possibility here is the immense economic, technical and agricultural skill that the small Israeli State has developed: it is well endowed, with other economically advanced nations, to help its neighbours to similarly develop: an *Israeli* gifted Marshall Plan.

All this is complex and difficult, but not impossible. To encourage us we can, not only re-view the Marshall Plan, but consider how Vietnam has such friendly and mutually beneficial relationships with nations that attacked its population in such a long and destructive war only a few decades ago.

All kinds of possibilities can open up if we draw back from the abyss ... and acknowledge how and why we can all, so easily, become righteous monsters.

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### References and footnotes

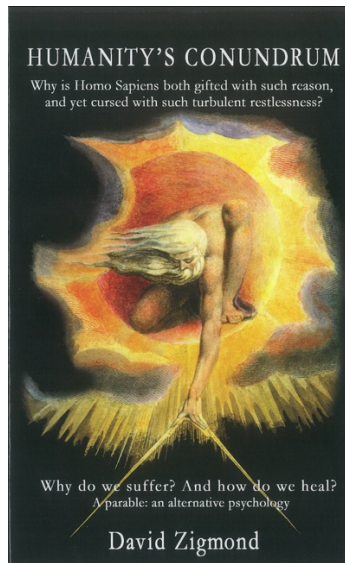
1. The reasons for the evolution of the anomalous large brains of Homo sapiens are explored in *Humanity's Conundrum: Why do we suffer? And how do we heal?* Zigmond, David (2021). Filament Publishing.
2. Of course, in reality nothing can occur out of a vacuum. The UN statement, I believe, was intended to draw thoughtful attention to the complex causes behind the shocking eruption of violence. The Israeli immediate and angry rejection of this notion was probably because, in their shocked rage, they saw anything but outright condemnation of the attack as a form of exculpation.

This is not necessarily so: for example, criminal justice may establish criminal guilt, but criminology researches the causes of the act. The two are perfectly compatible, though choreography clearly needs care. This essay is an attempt at a kind of criminology.

3. The Israeli West Bank settlers are a good example of a religious-myth based ideology assuming and executing superior rights and powers: by nature such fundamentalism is non-negotiable. In Israel's complex proportional representative parliament, the politically canny veteran Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, currently grants these settlers their specious 'rights' in return for their support, and thus retains his battling parliamentary majority.
4. In the *Realpolitik* of negotiations and treaties, and whatever the interest extracted for the USA, the Marshall Plan was, more widely, an extraordinary success. Historically it is hard to find an initiative of equal effectiveness or endurance. (Technically the Marshall Plan was confined to Western Europe, but Japan was similarly treated.)
5. The Marshall Plan was comprehensively funded in a way that enabled Japan and Germany (the vanquished) to genuinely and fully compete in trade and manufacture within two decades with the USA (the victors). Such equality in both competition and cooperation prevented a regression to erstwhile grievances and humiliations.
6. This contrasted sharply with those Eastern European countries that did not receive the Marshall Plan because they were sequestered and punitively controlled by the USSR; humiliation festered.

The fate of East and West Germany for the next forty years demonstrates this clearly.

7. At the time of writing (spring 2025), this is unlikely as long as Benjamin Netanyahu successfully remains in power with the support of the right-wing religious fundamentalist settlers. Many regard this as a kind of Faustian Pact: the serious consequences surely are instructive for all democracies, particularly those based on proportional representation.



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