

Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor

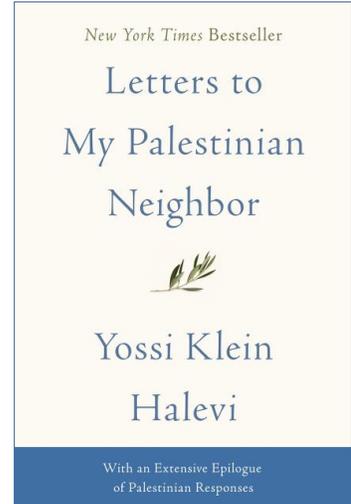
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By Yossi Klein Halevi

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Introduction

I call you “neighbor” because I don’t know your name, or anything personal about you—and for that we share the blame. Given our circumstances, “neighbor” might be too casual a word to describe our relationship. We are intruders into each other’s dream, violators of each other’s sense of home, incarnations of each other’s worst historical nightmares. Neighbors?



So begins Yossi Klein Halevi’s *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, a powerful attempt to reach beyond the Wall and into the hearts of “the enemy.” In these ten, brief letters, Halevi endeavors to explain his position as a liberal, American-born Jew who immigrated to Israel in his 20s, intoxicated by a vision of a homeland and now, desperate to see it succeed as a morally responsible, democratic state in the Middle East. And now, in a brand-new Epilogue, Palestinian readers have been given a chance to respond through their own powerful letters.

Deeply informative, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor* is an education in a dream and the inevitable conflict that has been born of it. As Halevi probes Zionism and the battle of competing narratives that has raged between Israelis and Palestinians in the last 70 years, he attempts to untangle the knot of human emotions that has encircled the conflict. In words that often read like poetry, Halevi interrogates the complex mess of faith, anger, warmth, pride, and shame he feels as a Jew living in Israel, using history and personal experience as his guide.

These illuminating and poignant letters are addressed to Halevi’s Palestinian neighbor, and yet they are also sure to speak to a wide, American Jewish audience, perhaps, particularly, the many secular, American Jews who prefer to disassociate themselves from Israel and the conflict. This is a problem that causes many American Jews to avert their eyes. *Letters from My Palestinian Neighbor* forces the reader to look.

Sure to stir a great deal of debate, on all sides, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor* is a perfect book for our complicated times.

Visit <https://www.letterstomyneighbor.com/> for more, including reader responses to *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does *Letters* emphasize the need for each side to share its narrative? Why is narrative so important to this conflict? How can sharing opposing narratives bring the two sides closer? Or will emphasizing those opposing narratives only widen the gap between them and make peace even more elusive? What is the relationship between narrative and truth?

2. Why does *Letters* emphasize Jewish peoplehood in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? How does peoplehood distinguish Judaism from other faiths? What do you see as the most important elements of Jewish identity?
3. One premise of *Letters* is that any approach to Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking must begin with a frank acknowledgment that both sides believe that all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea belongs by right to them – but that each side must then contract its claim to accommodate the competing claim. What do you see as the benefits and the problems to this approach?
4. *Letters* also emphasizes the role of faith in peacemaking – an approach widely rejected in the West, where religion is often regarded as part of the problem in the Middle East, not part of the solution. Can religion play a positive role in this conflict?
5. What is the significance of the fact that half of Israel's Jewish population come from families originating in the Arab and Muslim worlds? Do shared cultural memories of Jews and Arabs bode well for future peacemaking, or do traumatic family memories of Jewish dislocation only complicate the chances for peace?
6. What are the major disagreements with Yossi's narrative that emerge in the letters from Palestinians? What are the points of potential agreement?
7. Do you see any possibility for a shared narrative emerging between Palestinians and Israelis? Is a shared narrative essential for peace, or can the two sides coexist without reconciling their profoundly different readings of their shared history?
8. What do you think Palestinians and Israelis need to understand about each other?
9. After reading this book, do you feel less or more hopeful about the chances of an agreement between Palestinians and Israelis? Do you think Yossi is an optimist or a pessimist?
10. Yossi has said in interviews that the most difficult part of writing *Letters* was in getting the tone right – combining empathy for Palestinian suffering with affirmation of the Zionist narrative. Citing the text, do you think he succeeded or failed? How did the Palestinian respondents react to his tone?