

Introduction

Hello everyone. Welcome to the final meeting of Week 13 of “Eyes on Gaza.” When we began holding the daily gatherings during Israel’s war with Iran, we acted out of a sense of urgency, aware of the need to keep our gaze focused on the atrocities taking place in Gaza. Since then we have continued to look straight ahead. But where are we looking from? Where are we positioned as spectators, including those of us who oppose what unfolds before us? Often our gaze is positioned as refusal. To look means to resist, to declare that these atrocities are not being committed in our name. Yet to a large extent we are all implicated, partners in the ongoing destruction. How does this fact — how does the very location of our gaze, as well as our ability to direct our gaze at the gaze itself — affect our capacity to act, to disrupt, to refuse? Today we are hosting Professor Ayelet Ben-Yishai, who has turned “Eyes on Gaza” into what it is, and whose scholarly and activist work embodies the immanent connection between thought and action. Ayelet is a professor of English literature at the University of Haifa, and we are fortunate to have her as a colleague and friend. Her research is situated at the intersection of literature, law, culture and history. These days she is working on the political meanings of being involuntarily involved or complicit — the question of ‘complicity’. Ayelet will speak on this question today. We thank her very much and look forward to hearing her.

Talk

Thank you, Lior and Ido. Thank you to everyone here today and to those who usually come. I’ll keep my acknowledgments short because, as usual, I have many words. So I’ll start straight away. I just want to show one picture, and then we’ll continue. At the large demonstration in Sakhnin, about a month and a half ago, I photographed a Palestinian woman holding a sign that stated and commanded: “Silence is complicity – Speak up for Gaza!” To some extent it seems to me that we are all here because of that command. We are here to break the heavy cloud of silence over what is being done in our name and by our hands in Gaza. A cloud hangs over our media, our society, our universities, our health and legal systems, and also over our demonstrations and our opposition to the government. We have spoken a lot here at “Eyes on Gaza” about silence. Today I want to focus precisely on the question of complicity, a term that has no Hebrew translation but which we hear more and more. The word complicity comes from the Latin *complicare*, meaning to be folded with. That is to say, it indicates a condition in which we are not necessarily doing something wrong personally or actively, intentionally, but are entangled in that wrong through structural partnership, through membership in some collective.

We are complicit in various injustices as citizens of a state, as taxpayers, as users of the earth’s depleted resources, as holders of privileges, or even as beneficiaries of past injustices. For example, am I complicit if I inherited an apartment that was bought or given to my grandfather following the expulsion or dispossession of others? Did my university grow to prominence on the funds of slave owners or slave traders? This is a question many universities in the United States and Britain confront; or simply: was I lucky to be on the wealthy side of capitalism? On the face of it, the discourse of complicity is important, because – as the sign I showed suggests – it propels us to action. To distance myself from my complicity I must act, speak, demonstrate, shake off and disconnect. Thus, for example, various Jewish American organizations advocating “NOT IN MY NAME”, seek to sever the way in which the State of Israel “folds” them into its acts of occupation, dispossession, war crimes, while purporting to act in the name of Judaism or Jews worldwide, or against antisemitism, real or manufactured. The same goes for those who leave Israel because they refuse to be part of these wrongs, and for those who declare: “I am not my government,” a phrase that has lately gained traction on Facebook.

The problem, of course, is that those who leave Israel may cleanse their conscience, but they do not solve the injustice. Gaza's residents continue to be murdered and to starve at an incomprehensible rate, even if "I am not my government." The hostages, Israeli and Palestinian alike, are still rotting in tunnels and cells, and the ethnic cleansing in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank continues to accelerate. Another problem with the complicity discourse is that it very quickly becomes a discourse of moral purity. In this view the world is divided in two: those who are complicit and are the bad ones, and those who are not complicit and are the good ones – those who are "on the right side of history," as we say. This discourse is preoccupied with the moral standing of the perpetrators rather than with the injustice itself — that is, with stopping the genocide.

What I propose instead is to approach the problem of complicity as a political question — "what should I do?" — rather than a moral question — "am I among the good or the bad?" For example, I tend to say that as an Israeli I was born on the wrong side of history, and it seems I will also die on that wrong side. Those are the cards I was dealt, and those cards also afforded me considerable privileges. After I finished being depressed about being on the wrong side of history, the truly important political question arises: given that I am condemned to live my life on the wrong side of history, what do I do with all these years, with this whole life on the wrong side? Since I am here today, you can understand that my answer is not nihilistic. That is to say, I do not think that if we are all complicit, there is nothing to be done and that's it. On the other hand, I also do not want to induce paralyzing guilt in all of us. On the contrary, I argue that the difficulty of complicity — that it is entangled and cannot be untied — is also its point of strength. I try to use my complicity in my research and activism as a political tool, as a key to understand how and where I can act to reduce the injustices in which I am entangled, and not in order to extract myself from our shared responsibility for the wrong.

This requires observation and learning, "staying with the trouble," as Donna Haraway says. Staying with the things that are hardest, those things we cannot solve or erase. Instead of fleeing from them, or repressing them, we must direct our gaze at them – hello "Eyes on Gaza"! – and learn how they work, not as something outside of us, but precisely as something we are entangled in. I think the way we are entangled contains within it the ways we can act. I think this is the best way to increase good and justice in the world. And I think it is important to increase good and justice in the world, or at least to reduce the injustice as much as we can.

I want to finish with two examples, or insights. As faculty members, we are also complicit in the wrongs of the university. Like the state, the university exerts an enormous amount of power and violence to keep us in a permanent state of shock, of trauma, of helplessness and deep sorrow — we are very good at deep sorrow. We try to survive and to protect ourselves and what we hold dear, and thus we submit, without knowing or wishing to, to a reality that seems unavoidable. We have become excellent at identifying the ways in which "all is lost," the ways in which we are helpless. But in fact, we have power. Israeli society places enormous privilege in our hands, or at least in the hands of some of us: our tenure. If we use it only to preserve our personal power and status, then, like the legal system faced with war crimes, we sin against those who gave us that position to speak the truth without fear. Therefore, we must use our tenure to challenge the narrowing and silencing discourse, to show whom it silences, whom it marginalizes, what and whom it delegitimizes, and what kind of society and culture it produces. We must take visible actions to show our students that we stand by them, that they are not forsaken. Above all, we are obliged not only to analyze the existing situation but also to point to other ways of thinking, and to make the language of alternative thinking present in society.

The philosopher Charlotte Knowles argues that perhaps we have no responsibility for how we come to be in a state of complicity, since we are folded into it, and perhaps we also have no ability to solve the injustice, but we do have responsibility for accepting the existing situation as the only possibility, and for not preparing ourselves actively for the possibility that things could be otherwise. I will conclude with an example, more important than any right now. We Israelis constantly speak about the sanctity of life, but in practice we venerate life selectively. It is always

divided into two sides, us and them. This selection, this selectivity even, erases us and our humanity and has brought us to the present day in which life is cheaper than ever. Thus, tragically, the struggle for the lives of our hostages devalues itself when it refuses to include everyone's lives. Because a society that has trained its heart to be coarse at the deaths of tens of thousands of Gazans is stunned to discover that the lives of its own citizens have also become cheap, that we have all become potential victims on the altar of aggression, militarism, national pride, governmental preservation and the sanctification of the land. It turns out that quite quickly and easily one comes to sacrifice even Jews on the altar of Jewish supremacy. But it is possible to imagine — and there are those who insist on doing so — a struggle to return the hostages, to topple the government, that places the lives of everyone, between the Jordan and the sea, side by side and center stage. Talking about life as the supreme value is easy. Understanding that it is not an empty slogan or a surrender to kitsch of death requires deep change of consciousness and persistent political action. From the slogan: "Not in my name" to the slogan: "Yes in my name, and therefore I must resist." I hope that we are developing this thinking here at "Eyes on Gaza" and that this is our political action. It is important, it is terribly difficult, but we have no other choice.

Thank you.