

Esau's Mission, or Trauma as Propaganda: Disability after the Intifada  
Marcy Epstein  
University of Michigan

**Abstract:** Israelis and Palestinians, while sharing an I/Abrahamic root, many chapters of Semitic history, and common values of resourcefulness and valor, both have defended their cultural boundaries through the exchange of mutilating, annihilative blows upon the other. The *intifada* (an Arabic word meaning to shake off or shiver because of illness, fear, or weakness) of the millennium signify a trope of body and status among the fragmented population in the region; specifically, the propagandizing of traumatic events that suggest victimization and invalidation. The discursive nature of “unnatural” catastrophe—devastation of Palestinian communities by Israeli Defense Forces, blitzing of Israeli civilians in planned attacks— substitutes the propaganda of trauma for the reality of disability experienced in both cultures. Reflecting the duality of rhetorical positions seen in I/Abraham's disposition of both Isaac and Esau, this essay links the root of trauma propaganda to the ideology of religious fitness and righteousness.

**Key Words:** trauma, Intifada, Biblical sources

“Is it really necessary that the lives of two nations living together in one place depend on the solely political concepts of majority and minority? Has not the time come to try to put the concept in different terms? And isn't it possible that this particular location and our particular situation may be just the circumstances in which to begin trying? True, it is very difficult, very, very difficult; it demands tremendous daring, and in order to accomplish it courageous and independent thinking is required, capable of formulating a new means to achieve new goals. But whoever knows our situation thoroughly, knows that we have no other choice; only here, if anywhere lies the true path--all other paths are deceptive.”  
Martin Buber, “We Must Grant Arabs Truly Equal Rights” (1962)

“Group feeling results only from blood relationship or something corresponding to it. . . One feels shame when one's relatives are treated unjustly or attacked.”  
Ibn Khaldun, Chapter 8 of the *Muqaddimah* (1377)

Islamists use a curious word, *missions*, to divide our pasts into eras, of which Muhammad is the ultimate messenger. This essay begins by describing closely part of one particular mission corresponding to the second half of the Hebraic *Bereshit* (Genesis), although it is not intended to transmit the Holy Qu'ran nor provide an authoritative *midrash* (exposition) of chapter and verse. Rather, I intend to examine a third, hard-wound thread—an early representation of what it means to be *disabled*—that is woven more and more visibly into two mutually referential “missions” colliding now between Israel and Palestine. The missionary elements comprising A/Ibrahim's<sup>1</sup> time to Joseph's—where the religious clans of Isaac and Ishmael were sent to settle, how they became two peoples in relation to one land, the nature of the rupture-- provides a remarkable view into subconscious messages brought forward to modern times in the Middle East. The mission of sacred text and modern geo-politics combine vis a vis the traditional disability social construct of advantage and disadvantage. This social construct may be first seen in the

relationship of Esau and Jacob, next in the ensuing construction of related people with varying religious ideologies, and more recently in the destruction of modern “religious” states.

Even more, ingrained in both versions of the mission are the precursors of *intifada* well before the term energized us on the evening news. The Intifada (of recent history, based on an Arabic word meaning to shake off or shiver because of illness, fear, or weakness) spur an important trope of body and status that both major populations in the region (for there other populations in addition to Jews and Arabs) communicate to each other and to an international audience. This *intifada*<sup>2</sup> is seen most in the aural and visual images projected by Western and Eastern media in order to raise awareness, and perhaps outrage, over the subjection of the weak. Most often, these are traumatic images of people’s bodies in various states of physical harm. Although the media does not call this the creation of disability among Israelis or Palestinians, disabled people are created from within the promise of nationalist gain; thus physical and emotional disabilities are expressed in the language of politics and religion.

Metaphorically and socio-politically, people with disabilities are rising up with their depiction, their identities as “disadvantaged” in an “advantaged” society shaken off as the destruction of people on both sides of the conflict grows more disastrous. Within this traumatic conflict this “third” people is born of the children of Ishmael and Isaac, born from the same post-Biblical mission. Their identities are forcibly created and shifted by the undercurrent discourses of righteousness and catastrophe both Israeli and Palestinian governments transmit to the public. Created and empowered in this process, people with disabilities from both Islamic and Jewish states have arrived transfiguratively in the Promised Land, even while they may have lived there their whole lives. This *intifada* is separated but intrinsically related to the more famous one. Additionally, a wide range of Jewish-Arab conflict propagandists, independent and bureaucratic, sanctioned and unsanctioned, guide the representation of disability in order to advance an entirely different dimension of civil rights. The experiences of people disabled in holy war may thus be distorted into the master construct of the political Intifada, their words and bodies used as propaganda. However, their presence on both sides of the conflict speaks to the establishment of new “peoples with disabilities” worthy of examination.

### The Canaanite Equation: Disability and Displacement

“Stranger on the bank, like the river . . . tied up to your  
name by water. Nothing will bring me back from my free  
distance to my palm tree: not peace nor war. Nothing  
will inscribe me in the Book of Testaments. . .  
And what are we to do, then?  
What  
are we to do  
without  
exile?” (Mahmoud Darwish, “The Bed of the Stranger,” 1999).

In lore, A/Ibrahim blesses and charges his daughter-in-law Rebecca to deliver the peoples of the ancient Middle East. In the holy Torah, she is told by her god, “Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body. One people will be mightier than the other, And the older shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23).<sup>3</sup> Like his uncle Ishmael, a latter patriarch of Muslims whom Isaac replaces in the birthright of the Judeans, Esau is born

first to Rebecca but loses his position in the familial order.<sup>4</sup> Esau is described as more aggressive, like his mother, Jacob more passive, like his father. Esau is born freakishly mature and strong, with hair all over his body; Rebecca overprotects his underdeveloped twin, nicknaming Jacob “Tam,” for “simple.” In a community where strength means survival and weakness means non-viability and mortality, the contrast between infants is apparent. Their physical difference—strong and weak, hairy and slippery, punching out of the womb or clinging on to the stronger’s heel—connects their relative abilities and disabilities—Esau mightier, Jacob meeker—to their places in the social order.

That the meek inherit the earth proves to be both true and an overstatement. Certainly Jacob’s mild disabilities and disposition shield and define him. Esau grows into a man who conquers the outdoors; Jacob stays close to his own clan of matriarchs, eats carefully, and limits his activity. Perhaps most obvious in their mutual dislike, the sons together form one truly viable entity. They resent the other as their own lack. American rabbi Moshe Reiss (1961) wonders at the crossroads of generation and geography, if Isaac (the father and brother to Ishmael) hoped that giving his birthright to Esau would be a *tikkun*, a “corrective experience to rewrite his own history,” Isaac’s own passivity when he lay beneath A/Ibrahim’s sacrificial knife. But events conspire against Isaac’s *intifadic* intent to correct both his passivity and his father’s expulsion of Ishmael. One evening Jacob manipulates a famished Esau into trading his legal standing for a bowl of cooked lentils. Next he positions himself as Esau before the decrepit Isaac. Finally Jacob extracts the covenant father gives to son: “Be master of your brothers,” and be protected from those who would attack him. When all seems lost for the son whom Isaac truly admires, he manages to bless Esau inversely with words binding Esau to Ishmael, “Serve your brother, but when you gain your freedom, break his yoke from your neck” (Gen. 27:40). Jacob herds sheep, gathers wives, makes more Jews. Esau’s end is *untold*. We return to his “mission,” his *intifadah*, later.

While Reiss views this consecration as the pre-figuration of the Jews and Rome, the tighter explication may be that Esau’s path in life, beginning with a plot to kill his brother, intertwines with the unfinished business of disinherited and privileged sons in Canaan. And rather than prefigure the religious conflict of unrelated clans, this pre-Koranic picture is arguably linked to the split generations of Ishmael and Esau, Isaac and Jacob. Not just child birthright seals this ancient dispute, but also marriage. Esau returns to Ishmael to marry his first cousin, granddaughter of A/Ibrahim. Without birthright, Esau still exerts his domination among the laws of nature and heredity, for Esau most intensively carries the Canaanic line. Palestinians and Israelis are kin. The inversion remains, too: Those who lost their rights are the ones with natural law behind them, strength and birth order. Despite their abilities, Esau’s descendants are disadvantaged. And despite his disability and disadvantage, Jacob’s descendants are given advantage, an advantage borne from subversion of natural law in favor of religious certainties like blessings, legal birthrights, and subversive “choseness.”

In the Hebrew Bible, the two brothers forgive each other and share the riches of the region, both blessed by the divine in their own ways. This ideal assumes the true reckoning of advantages by both natural and religious affirmation. In the Qu’ran, Esau and Rebecca, including the description of his natural domination, are absorbed into Ibrahim (A/Ibrahim), Ishmael, and Elisha’s establishment of a second people, to whom the last Prophet Muhammed and other believers trace themselves. Around Esau in the Qu’ran there is exegetical *silence*, certainly no reconciliation scenario. The *tikkun* of Hebraic lore is replaced by a purposeful, abstractly faithful mediation that Allah strands his people so that they must assert their beliefs through corrective

action (Qu'ran, trans. 1997): "We never sent a messenger, save with the language of his folk, that he might (make the message) clear for them. Then Allah sendeth whom He will astray, and guideth whom He will."<sup>5</sup> This teaching of Islam (surrender to belief and struggle with those who impose stories of disbelief) reformulates the entire thread of Genesis and Israel, so that the outsider becomes the correction to the correction. To the point, those who are in the fertile lands with their "disbeliefs" and their "advantages" should be put out, while the Islamists who endure banishment are those who will ultimately inherit the earth. This becomes the greater mission of Muhammed. Now A/Ibrahim thanks Allah for both sons (Sûr. XIV, v. 39) but foresees—as does the patriarch of each following generation—that familial, geo-political, and religious order will clash.

That the religious and geo-political bodies of modern Israel and Palestine are in a similar mortal combat few people would disagree. Dual narratives fuel dueling states. The religious discourse contained and passionately construed as "birthright" trumps all other methods of delineation between the descendant clans of A/Ibrahim. Semites or disabled, birthright translates into civil freedom and belonging, the ability to determine one's destiny despite another's advantage. When birthrights clash—and this is basically the case in the region and in the cultural logic about people with disabilities who live there—the effects are profound, indeed bloody, rhetorical, and enduring. Complicated further by the relatively recent near-extirpation of the Jews in the first half of the twentieth century, the warrior and the spiritualist clans are now figured in *jihad* (holy war) and *eretz yisrael* (the instating of the children of Israel) for what is possibly the longest disaster (and possibly the longest genocides) in history.

### Contest of the Fittest

Israelis and Palestinians, while sharing an A/Ibrahamic root, many chapters of Semitic history, and common resourcefulness and dedication, clash over cultural and geo-political boundaries through the exchange of mutilating, annihilative blows upon the other. Including executions and bombings, over three thousand Palestinians have been killed in the latest phase of conflict (Palestinianmonitor.org, n.d.). Since September 2000, Israel has suffered as the result of more than 40 suicide bombings, 500 mortalities, and 4,000 casualties, including army infiltrators (Meforum.org, n.d.). What goes less noticed in such warfare of ideology and difference is the reading of disability in the "contest of the fittest" between natural and religious right. Most readers of this journal are familiar with the physical events occurring in both civilian communities, although we are coming to associate these disabling characteristics with conflicts in Baghdad or Darfur. People are being maimed, disfigured, dismembered, and broken down quickly and slowly, from live ammunition, shelling, explosions, and reactive conditions like heart attack or stroke.

As Arabs and Jews struggle to resolve the trope of disability that resonates in geo-political advantages and disadvantages over the land, the more they contest, the more people with disabilities are created and the more intertwined their warfare and welfare become. The Israeli army positions itself as the arbiter of Palestinian sovereignty, perceiving themselves defensive victims of past incursions into their country. Frequent bombings in Israeli cities and towns generate powerful sympathy for this position, including the citizens of all nationalities who are being hurt. Palestinians who live within Israeli territories, injured or not, are particularly vulnerable in the staging of this conflict, since their state disability benefits are limited and based on the determination that they cannot be linked, at any level writes *The Arabic News* (1997), to

“combatant activity.”<sup>6</sup> In Palestinian society, which had long cast disability as a type of shame, the retaliation of the Israeli army against men and boys throwing stones added the consequence of disability to a long list of civil rights infractions. Negative perceptions of physical disability began to change with the Intifadas, starting with a mass uprising in 1987 and reoccurring every few years, continuing to change with new waves of resistance. Kozue Nagata, an Economic Affairs Officer for the United Nations Economic and Social Commission, explains: “The issue of disability became an important political agenda all of a sudden” (2003).

Specifically the propagandizing of traumatic events suggests vulnerability and invalidation. Palestinians have been expelled from their homes and farms by imminent domain practices of the Jewish State, sometimes violently so by bulldozing, military evacuation, and refugee internment in several camps along the territorial border. Israeli civilians have been attacked regularly both within occupied territories and the areas given to them by the British Mandate. The resistance efforts on both sides make for excellent journalistic fodder. Internet, television, radio, and print media of all party persuasions spare us nothing: People’s bodies splayed on bloodied gurneys say enough for most spectators. The body disabled through war trauma appears more final, more mortal, than any political organization could provide an answer for. Therefore, this image of disability is a genius stroke for social manipulators, since it resonates to any number of issues related to human vulnerability.<sup>7</sup> Because they can be judged by readers both East and West, each state’s public relations bureau may spin at least two contesting messages from the relentless “traumatization” of the clash. First, how unfair it is to harm and disable people who are trying to live in their homeland, and second, how the disability, harm, and death of civilians make right additional action. Like all wars, the destruction of people’s bodies is “unnatural,” human-made, not a “natural” disaster like tsunamis, droughts, or hurricanes. The recursive nature of “unnatural” catastrophe—devastation of Palestinian communities by Israeli Defense Forces, blitzing of Israeli civilians in planned attacks— roils propaganda of trauma for the reality of disability experienced in both cultures.

#### ‘In the Steel Trap’: Trauma Propaganda

“Alas, alas!

If only you could remain the child, the human being!

But I shudder, and live in dread

That you may grow up inside the trap,

In this time with amputated legs, clad in khaki,

In cruel death, in smoke and sorrow.

I fear, my child, that the human in you may be smothered” (Fadwa Tuqan, “Eytan in the Steel Trap”).

“Trauma” (wounding) itself provokes two natural responses, defense and offense. The declaration of trauma tells us that people are wounded and thus are more vulnerable, perhaps why Israeli agencies document each bombing incident with sober, non-incendiary fashion. To declare trauma and to document each incident with zeal, piety, injustice, and righteousness serves the second response to wounding. The more people are shown decrying the invalid, the more people with disabilities may be linked with the invalidation of the greater State. Demonstrated there is the rhetoric of trauma and disability that interweaves itself in the region’s

contemporary conflict. Such is the case with many Palestinian reports and websites, as will be shown later.

In the sense that media coverage migrates toward public interest in the physical and emotional aftermath of regional conflict, the propagandizing of trauma in images of disability may be used for political ends. It may even fuel the war between peoples as long as people are outraged over messages in disability about vulnerability and invalidation without evaluating the rhetoric behind them. Another curious use of this current “mission” rides on the energy being put into the new visibility and accommodation of disabled people in both Israel and Palestine. In Israel, the ethos of disability discrimination and institutionalization of people with disabilities is being edged out by this visibility. Shekel, Alut, Enoch, Shalva, TASH, and other disability organizations are networked more closely with Bizchut, Israel’s Human Rights Center for People with Disabilities (2002). Within two years of the establishment of Palestine in its latest form of statehood under Yasser Arafat and his proponents, reports the Hasbra Commission, the “Israeli ADA” that Bizchut advocated had its first chapter passed: “The Equal Rights for People with Disabilities Law of 1998.” Oren Ganor, a spokesperson for Bizchut, the region’s center for human rights for people with disabilities, intended for the law to enforce the modification of all public buildings with full accessibility and to open up public transportation by March, 2005.

Trauma propaganda about disabled people is trading in more diverse cultural currencies than it first intended. Bizchut now maintains a civil rights hotline and a legal department to address the rights of people with disabilities, regardless of ethnicity or nationality. They serve in both Arabic and Hebrew. Their one limitation is that they specify “Israeli veterans.” But the factual increase of people with disabilities (600,000, of whom 142,000 qualify for state assistance, according to an Australian on-line access clearinghouse in 1992) on both sides of the Canaanic equation transmogrifies into an increase in call for accommodations by people disabled through *jihad* or defense of *eretz yisrael*, i.e., in the “heroization” of the weak. While just six percent of this figure suffered serious wounds<sup>8</sup> as a result of serving in security forces, these disabled men and women are featured prominently as Israel’s pride in its service-people, and receive cars, education subsidy, and medical treatments that support independent living. In its article, “Disability Inequality in Israel,” the Access Foundation interviewed Sammy Smooha, a sociologist in Haifa: “Being ‘war-wounded’ is the best deal for a disabled person.” Yoav Kraiem, a young disability activist, rejoins that veterans should be supported by a culture that so desperately needs their warriors, but his point is disputed within the disability community.

Ilan Ghilon, who is a lawmaker, is left wing, and also has a disability, underscores the link between Israel’s propagandizing of disabled veterans and its relative cruelty to civilian people with disabilities: “[No matter which disability and how it is sustained] it’s time we stop making this distinction between the ‘hero’ and the ‘weak’.” Once soldiers with disabilities leave the Arab-Jewish limelight, their disabilities assume a different somatic hue. Recalling Esau, one soldier paralyzed in 1973 explained that his visibility as “rugged” and “pioneering” for Israeli autonomy evaporated once time passed and he no longer bore immediate association with traumatic conflict. He reported to the Access Foundation that his injury had later “depersonalized him in the eyes of his countrymen.” Here is the crux of the Esau-Jacob polarity, the valorization of disabled warriors or wounded civilians and the simultaneous invalidation of those thought meek.

‘In a Steel Trap’: Warring and Disability

Public visibility of people with disabilities is growing amidst a market for such imagery, a market now wearied with the propagandistic echoes of war trauma. Disability policy and education in both territories now must take advantage of the caché of disadvantage when “disadvantage” musters such deep awe in the region. Some pick up on this “mission.” Kraiem and two dozen other activists with disabilities camped out at the Labor and Welfare ministry in 2002, with Reuters reporting that the group ventured into busy traffic and grappled with police in front of the Knesset, Israel’s Parliament (Access Foundation, 2002). Protesters are demanding minimum wage for government stipends for people with disability (currently the stipend is a little more than half that), as well as transportation and nursing subsidies. Representatives of Parliament responded that the Palestinian uprising was so costly that such terms could not be met. The discourse around trauma is being taken up appropriately by disability activists. “More than political display,” Kraiem argued that the “dignity of all of Israel’s ‘weak’” lay in advocacy by people with disabilities.

Jewish and Islamic traditions of caring for people with wounds, mutilations, paralysis, and other physical disabilities vary slightly; the propaganda of each nation thus varies in the formulation of trauma as the war’s “terror scale” or the “wounds of innocents.” Since disability has become a litmus test for the humanity of their cultures, both Israel and Palestine are forwarding civil rights and services for people with disabilities as their economies allow. Meira Weiss (2002), in her book, *The Chosen Body: The Politics of the Body in Israeli Society*, suggests that gender and disability together describe the sociology of Israeli perspective, a “hybrid society” that must deal with a range of contradictory and distorted body images. Childhood disability, army injury, and soldier death figure into an iconography of Zionist “restoration” of a culture unified, secular and religious, by its army.

Sander Gilman (2004), in his review of Weiss, provided the crucial context for reading propagandized bodies in Israel specifically. He reflected that people who get their disabilities from war have more visible bodies, presumably for the international media to reflect, yet face the same cultural obstacles as their counterparts born with disabilities: “The warrior’s body is sacrosanct. Disability trumps the warrior’s body in contemporary Israeli society.” The Qu’ran advises Palestinian Muslims to forbid the “feeble-minded” and other disabled people direct use of their own wealth. Ethically and legally they are expected to absorb this wealth and clothe and feed people with disabilities (Sûr. IV, v. 5). Very similar attitudes may be found in Jewish Scripture (Abrams, 1998).<sup>9</sup> Sadly, neither Israel nor Palestine treats people with congenital disabilities much beyond patronage or medical rehabilitation, still regularly abandoning disabled children and institutionalizing adults. In Israel, the image of disability and the treatment of people with disabilities are just coming into any alignment. The natural state of people with disabilities is beginning to modify the propagandized message about a society wounding itself by perpetual conflict.

Nonetheless, mutual characterization of Israel and Palestine exposes the enemy as a wholly dehumanizing and disabling force, the face of which is shifting too rapidly for this writer to depict in relation to disability development or history. As I began to write this essay in December, 2005, the group Hamas called for all factions to renew the attacks against Israel that had begun in 1987 and again in 1997 for the reason that the “Zionist occupier” had continued to destroy Palestine (Palestine Information Center, 2005). National Public Radio reported that Hamas and Fatah, Palestine’s *in situ* and *ex officio* parties, are bombing each other (June 1, 2006). In Palestine, millions of dollars were funneled into rehabilitation centers for Palestinians, but these were designed as triage for Intifada-injured, permanent disabilities coming from stone

and gun fire, like spinal cord injuries, amputations, and loss of eyes. According to Palestinian Ph.D. student George Malki, the majority of disabled Palestinians were “eclipsed” in treatment by this minority of disabled martyrs, in part, he claims, because non-government organizations (NGOs) control them. Thus, the NGOs, explains Malki (1997), serve some of the “unreachable” but mainly attend to the martyrs whose images reflect political ends. Little cooperation exists between the NGOs about disability and the Palestinian National Authority, but community-based rehabilitation was introduced by local health workers, and in 1990, a central National Committee of Rehabilitation was formed. The political dynamic within each culture may vary slightly, but the connections and disconnections among ideological governments, holy values, and actual populations of people with disabilities reveal nearly identical problems. Trauma elicits more politics than accommodations. It is left to disability communities to assert their own “mission” within a highly complicated poli-speak. People within these disability communities must identify their own beliefs both in contrast and in relation to their greater geo-political situations.

### Disability in the Aftermath of Catastrophe

Left in the background of media representation, traumatized Israelis and Palestinians with disabilities struggle for civil rights, basic services, and reparations. Their disabilities are physical, psychiatric, and emotional. And because of the visibility of disability civil rights now, links between propaganda and trauma are also growing more apparent. According to the National Committee of Rehabilitation’s (NCR) guidelines, for example, 3-4% of Palestinians have disabilities, approximately 60,000-80,000 persons, of these, a majority need rehabilitation. The international webzine *Disability World* extended this coverage with Nawaf Kabbara’s 2003 report on the Beirut disability and violence conference, which stated that over 4000 Palestinians had been injured since the 2000 Intifada.<sup>10</sup> When NCR sources emphatically blame the Israeli Army violence for disability, it declares that its response will not be retaliation but the healing of itself. In a promising action that demonstrates sovereignty, Palestine will accommodate its disabled population by shifting their rehabilitative emphasis to the social integration of people with disabilities through community-based interventions (Abdeen et al., 1994). In the last fifteen years, the NCR has funded many studies that report about the concerns of people with disabilities within the eight districts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The reports appear consistent in their claims that intellectual disability highly correlates with poverty, that more men than women are disabled, that a great majority report serious rather than mild disabilities, and that most report Israeli army violence alongside their general disability demographic. An author known as “K.V.” (1992) directly assesses the effect of Palestinian rehabilitation for the Intifada. He or she finds that despite rehabilitation programs, the 131 people with disabilities interviewed had not successfully achieved social integration, a finding that parallels the experience of Israeli soldiers with disabilities once the political gaze of the world has moved on. The actual number of Intifada injuries does not surface in these reports.

Figuratively speaking, the Qu’ran’s silence on Esau’s response to Jacob allows the bifurcation of mission, since his outcome has in part to do with how he lives in relation to his privileged brother, and in part with how he comes to resolution in his own lifetime. Both trajectories offer an understanding of disability via advantage and disadvantage useful to the conflict between Israel and Palestine and for its combined, sizable, and growing population of people with disabilities. This understanding of disability may be instantly folded back into rhetoric, for the numbers of the hurt and disabled do surface with alacrity on websites serving the



political arm of Palestine and critics of Israeli policy in the region. The Palestinian National Information Centre of the Palestinian National Authority claims that the number of disabled in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip reached 29,849 and 16,214 respectively. On the Israeli far left, too, the criticism takes on an aggressive tone of resistance. The website Refusingtokill.net features Ethan Rabin's depiction, via passionate account, of "severe mental crises" like "real time bombs." One hundred discharged soldiers report this pseudo-psychiatric condition which sound more like attacks of conscientious objection. Using the propaganda style of infomantics, Rabin links their guilt and self-disgust over killing and mutilating with being drug addicts, depressives, and mental patients, one of whom breaks down shouting "Muhammed, Muhammed, Muhammed." The author expounds, "The Intifada had finished him."

Yet as we come away from the propaganda-for-war tactics in Palestine and the traumatic aftermath of each bombing in Israel dissipates for the outsider, it is important to note that each nation, by taking advantage of their disabled minorities, are also for the first time really giving people with disabilities a place and a voice. The Palestinian Red Crescent Society has begun to amass statistics of Intifada-injured families and is now providing psycho-social support, physical therapy, and learning therapies within poorer refugee areas. Of particular interest is M.O. Salem's, *Stigma and the Origin of Disability: The Case of the Palestinians*, a Master's thesis that advances disability as a social construct. Salem (1990) observes that the "Intifada-disabled" have "honorific disabilities" because of their steadfastness and symbolism for collective resistance. Salem contextualizes the ancient struggles between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East in terms of the honorific-disabled from cultures such as those of Eritrea, South Africa, or Nicaragua. As though shifting the axis of analysis from A/Ibrahim's familial metaphor, Salem attempts the longitudinal analysis of disability over a period of time in relation to political wars on the global stage. For example, Salem points our understanding of Intifada disabilities toward the "different adoptive measures used by the individual and society in accommodating a new physical state." He views disabilities as the function of "momentary political violence." This analysis is similar to Thomas Couser's (2005) third paradigm of disability in *Paradigm's Cost: Representing Vulnerable Subjects*, in which the author attributes a positive shift in definition to disability activists and scholars in the United States and United Kingdom since 1990. Couser's basic idea grows more ample when applied to the understanding of disability after Intifada. Disability is constructed synchronically, from culture to culture, and diachronically, over time. We are watching a fascinating "mission" unfold, of how disability identity and justice emerge with Israel and Palestine's respective acknowledgments of disability in traumatic times, not only in traumatic acts or representations.

To a small degree, what is happening for people with disabilities in the Middle East reflects a transformation into Western and liberal sociopolitical models as much as an equally small tug in the opposite direction of Eastern values. Studying disability and domestic citizenship in Delhi, Veena Das and Renu Addlakha (2001) emphasize that in Eastern contexts, notions of domestic citizenship may be elicited from "the *performance* of kinship." Kinship itself is "enacted in relation to disability and impairment," a psychiatric and social adjustment. Drawing on both Weiss and Deutsch & Nussbaum's 2000 scholarship on defect, Das and Addlakha study this adjustment as a way to engage cross-cultural and multigenerational attitudes toward visible difference and (referring to Weiss's depiction of Middle Eastern children) the "appearance-impaired." If we were to shift this representation of the "appearance-impaired" from treating disability as object to making disability the subject of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, this perspective echoes both the Israeli iconography of dying and disabled commuters as a vision

of restoration of Zion, as well as the Palestinian representation of mothers wailing over injured or dying children. Both cultures are “appearance-impaired.” Both Palestine and Israel may use the appearance of disability and injury from the conflict to represent other interests, but they may miss the message that disability justice and disability experience could bring to the socio-political table. Like Esau and Jacob, their collective future is both entwined and separate, together in sameness and difference. Such is the human experience of all people with disabilities.

### Reuniting Jacob and Esau: Peace in Disability?

“Now. See your events as my events.

Everything will be as before: Abraham will again

Be Abram. Sarah will be Sarai” (Yehuda Amichai, “Do Not Accept”).

Perhaps it is naïve to suggest that natural and religious rights cannot exist without the other. Religious politics of East and West, Judeo-Christianity and Islam enrobe this region with various influences and agendas. Similarly, the identities of people with disabilities in Israel and Palestine will reflect this context, even consciously so. Perhaps part of the difficulty in the composition of disability rights and dignity, even as they are created through this long-lived disaster, is that Esau’s thread has not been contextualized beyond two improbable, divergent endings. Among Jews, he surrenders to Jacob and forgives him for taking advantage when Jacob has been enabled to do so. Among Muslims, he dissipates into his uncle’s vision of a separate people. Among people with disabilities, the resultant squabble over sovereignty and justice is absorbing, since the “hero-weakling” dyad has long worked against people with disabilities, and it is, on *only rare, deserving* occasion, refreshing to be honored as heroes. Furthermore, people with disabilities should be the heroes of their own narratives rather than those of territory wars or other phenomena of disaster that hurt, stigmatize, objectify, abandon, or exclude people. Disability represents human evolution and wholeness, and thus the experience of disability is desecrated when attached to forces of destruction and fragmentation, like war.

Are there words for the original wounds in sacred traditions that have spurred such trauma, such profound hatred between related peoples? How must Esau have felt toward his family and their abandonment? How would Jacob feel about his enablement? What lacunae are there in the Torah’s rendering of social disadvantage from which Israelis (and we) might learn, and what voices for missing sons and daughters might the believers of Islam abide in an embrace of difference? For the majority of people with disabilities in Israel and Palestine, the Intifada and the Defense are opportunities to connect in the language of disability the long thread of dispute over the human condition which they share but require accommodation to enjoy, Esau’s naturalness and Jacob’s spiritedness, one whole child of A/Ibrahim, without lack and at peace. Disability may become this catastrophe’s antidote. Disability consciousness may offer a lasting settlement. In the case of A/Ibrahim’s descendents, *culture to culture* and *time to time* demand of people with disabilities the ability to see their time and place as concurrent and self-same, even as extremely powerful forces work in and around them. Esau and Jacob, Muslim and Jewish, Arab and Jew, Palestinian and Israeli, in disability they are both common and sovereign.

**Marcy Epstein** is currently an advanced research Fellow at the University of Michigan for the U.S. Department of Education/OSERS National Institute for Disability Research and Rehabilitation, and Assistant Professor of Education, Language Arts, and Disability

at the University of Windsor. She writes about her spinal cord injury during the onset of *intifada* in her recent collection, *Deep: Real Life with SCI*. She has been developing new methodologies for narrative research for the medical and health sciences, facilitating the translation of disability experience into research and clinical practice. She plans to return to teaching disability studies next year.

## References

- Abdeen, Z., Habash, A., & Harami, G. (1994). *Development of a systematic tool for the collection of occupational data on disabled persons*. Gaza: Central Committee for Rehabilitation.
- Abrams, J. K. (1998). *Judaism and disability: Portrayals in ancient texts from the Tanach through the Bavli*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Accessibility Foundation (2002). *Disability inequality in Israel*. <http://www.accessibility.com.au>
- Bizchut.org.il, n.d.
- Couser, G. T. (2005). Paradigms' cost: Representing vulnerable subjects. *Literature and Medicine*, 24(1), 28-29.
- Das, V., & Addlakha, R. (2001). Disability and domestic citizenship: Voice, gender, and the making of the subject. *Public Culture*, 13(3).
- Gilman, S. (2004). Review: Meira Weiss, *The chosen body*. *Modern Judaism*, 24(1), 91-93.
- Introduction and Sûrah XIV, Ibrahim: Revealed at Mecca. *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (1997) (Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, trans.), xi, 186-190. New York: Meridian.
- Kabbara, N. (2003). *Arab conference on disability held October 2002 in Beirut identifies violence as a major cause of disability*. Beirut: Arab Organization of Disabled People. <http://www.disabilityworld.org>
- K. V. (1992). The effect of Palestinian rehabilitation organizations for Intifada Disabled. *Bethlehem University Journal*, 11(12), 97-98. Bethlehem: Bethlehem University.
- Malki, G. (1997). Reaching the unreached: The Palestinian experience during the intifada. *Enabling Education Network Newsletter*, 1 (December). Manchester: Centre for Educational Needs, University of Manchester. <http://www.eenet.org.uk>
- Meforum.org, n.d.
- Nagata, K. K. (2003). Gender and disability in the Arab region: The challenges in the new millennium. *Asia Pacific Disability Rehabilitation Journal*, 14(1),14.

New law would bar Palestinians from claiming compensation from Israel. *Arabic News*. (n.d.)  
<http://www.arabicnews.com>

Palestinian Information Center. (2005). *Hamas tad'u li-al-tasadi li-al-'udwan al-sahyuni wa-tudin qiyam al-sulta bi-l'tiqal al-Mujahideen*. <http://www.palestine-info.net>

Palestinianmonitor.org, n.d.

Reiss, R. M. (1961). Esau, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham. In J. Abramowitz, trans., *Bible Commentator; "Deuteronomy": Midrash Rabbah, I(15)*, 16-18. London: Soncino.

Salem, M. O. (1990). *Stigma and the origin of disability: The case of the Palestinians*. (excerpt, electronic version) Manchester: unpublished Master's thesis.

Weiss, M. (2002). *The chosen body: The politics of the body in Israeli society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The name A/Ibrahim represents the linguistic split between Muslim and Judaic translations of the father of faith. There are several variations on this name, but I choose this one so as to simplify the use of the name while preserving the separation of peoples in relating to their respective and still identical patriarchal root. I use standard English transliterations for all other names of people and places so not to distract the reader. Note here, too, that this essay will not be treating Christian sources on the patriarchs and matriarchs. Nor do I focus later on Christian Israelis and Palestinians, even though they may be equally passionate about the regional conflict and particularly since Christian notions of disability may dominate Western consciousness about the sick and the weak.

<sup>2</sup> Here I distinguish between the Intifada, the historical events of the last fifteen years marked by Israeli and Palestinian violence, and *intifada* (uncapitalized) as concept of resistance or shaking off of weakness as a way toward justice, a “lifting of the yoke” seen later in the Sūrah of I/Abraham in the next section.

<sup>3</sup> In the holy Qu’ran, this is not originally a disputed point, but “serving” the Jews is understood as correcting their spiritual ways.

<sup>4</sup> Significantly, this marks the beginning of the geo-political dispute between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims. A/Ibrahim and Ishmael’s first attempt to establish a holy temple starts in Jerusalem, but according to Muhammed, Jews in Al-Medinah wanted to switch the center for religious enlightenment to their city.

<sup>5</sup> Sūrah XIV, “Ibrahim: Revealed at Mecca.” Note that A/Ibrahim becomes changed to the more Islamic *Ibrâhîm*, when he settles Ishmael, patriarch of Moslem Arabs, into the infertile valley of Mecca. For a fascinating discussion of the *hunafa*, decidedly unclannish agnostics who yearned for the religion of A/Ibrahim (by extension, the laws of the Jews and not their perceived idolatry) and what Mohammed himself became, see citation below. Although the pattern of the outcast son protected by male clansmen continues into the earliest history of the prophet Mohammed, since, parallel to Esau, he loses his father at birth in Mecca and is protected first by his grandfather, then by his uncle.

<sup>6</sup> The tone of the remainder of this article is highly inflammatory and exemplifies the manner in which people with disabilities are positioned within a larger rhetoric on Palestinian civil rights and resistance against Israeli Occupation.

<sup>7</sup> Here is an opportunity to show the reader an onslaught of graphic and disturbing images associated with this bloody and highly personal war, an opportunity I consciously pass on I am less interested in extending trauma images, propaganda or not, for any number of reasons. Here, too, is the opportunity to “report” the extent of physical, psychological, and cultural trauma that lines the contemporary conflict; but again, the power to describe what is seen in each place can also traumatize, and even more likely the unpacking of each image I have myself witnessed or seen from photography (from artists and colleagues who have documented the Intifada in various peace efforts) will transmit some level of propaganda. Frankly it is difficult to see truths about people with disabilities in these war photographs or narratives. Each image of wounded and disabled people, whether seen in the destruction of body or of mind, detours the reality of life

---

with disabilities in Israel and Palestine in favor of the “heroic weakness” inherent in the lore of warring antipodes.

<sup>8</sup> People with milder physical and psychological wounds may or may not be included in the first statistic.

<sup>9</sup> I thank Alex Lubet for this point.

<sup>10</sup> Kabbara has co-founded the Arab Organization of Disabled People to monitor the civil rights of Arabs with disabilities in all countries.