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# TELL ME A STORY WITH A HAPPY ENDING, PART II

BY SAYED KASHUA AND ETGAR KERET

*Jerusalem, 2014.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER VAN AGTMAEL/MAGNUM

The exchange between Sayed Kashua and Etgar Keret continues  
(<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/tell-story-happy-ending-exchange-etgar-keret-sayed-kashua>).



*Their letters are translated, from the Hebrew, by Sondra Silverston.*

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*September 18, 2014*

Hi, Etgar,

*Sayed Kashua*

I read your letter at least twice, still looking for a sliver of hope, but without any luck, even though I'd be lying if I denied that ideas for possible solutions come to mind whenever I drive past those endless cornfields.

And, even with all the corn here, they don't make pizza with corn like they do in Israel. They've just never heard of it here, and it's the topping my kids like best when it comes to pizza. And Obama? You'd never catch me letting him eat corn on my balcony. That's all I need, for the President of the United States to leave corn kernels on my floor.



Apart from that, what do you mean, there's no room for everyone? Do you really think the problem is that the country's too small? I don't know, sometimes I think that the major problem is actually how to define this country. What exactly are its borders? When you say the country, do you include the West Bank and Gaza? I once thought that the day would come when we'd know what the borders of the country are. The Israeli government would hold a formal ceremony to announce the country's official borders

and declare that anyone who lives within those borders is a citizen with equal rights. That hasn't happened yet, and this week I read that the country plans to annex another four thousand *dunams* of West Bank territories for settlements or state land or some other designation that means stealing Palestinian land for Jews. Tell me, Etgar, how scared are you about what the government does? I mean, how scared are you that the whole world is going to start officially treating Israel like an apartheid state?

It scares me very, very much. Would you believe that I still care about Israel? I don't mean the government, God forbid, or its designation as a Jewish state. I mean the future of the place I lived in. I'm really not sure how much the country even sees its Arab as citizens. It does everything to explain to us that we're a remnant, a demographic problem, a fifth column. But I always insisted on seeing myself as a citizen of the country, and not only because of the Interior Ministry's formal definition. I always claim that I am a citizen who cares about the country and that, as a citizen who has no other country, the future of that place is important to me, and I want the country be as good a place for my Arab children to live in as it is for my Jewish neighbors' children.

You don't know how frightened I am of the moment I will no longer be able to say that I'm a citizen of that country. At a conference I took part in recently, a woman in the audience asked me if I thought that the State of Israel was a legitimate country. I actually started to sweat. "Yes," I answered. "I mean, the government does terrible things that aren't legitimate, the occupation isn't legitimate, the settlements are a crime, discrimination against Arab citizens is pure racism, and the country was established on the ruins of the Palestinian people, *al-nakba*, of course, and ..." And the woman in the audience continued, "So? I don't understand. You still claim that the country is legitimate?"

"But the people ..." I tried to answer her, and maybe myself. "You see, there are people there, and ..."

In short, Etgar, it really, really scares me. I know that in Israel people shout and carry on, *How dare you compare us to South Africa?* But what's going on in the territories is separation based on race. The fact is, a settler can vote, move around freely, get Social Security and medical insurance, and a Palestinian can't—that is separation based on race. And it's not only in the territories but also inside the 1948 borders, when we're talking about Arab citizens like me. How can you read in the papers this week that the Supreme Court has rejected a petition against the Admissions Committees Law, which is aimed at preventing Arab citizens from gaining access to state lands—state lands that were owned by Arabs not too long ago. (This has been happening for a long time, but now the practice has legal authority.) Is there any word but racist to describe the fact that a citizen can't live wherever he wants in his own country, that an Arab citizen has no access to more than eighty per cent of the territory of his own country?

And, would you believe, despite that I say to myself, “But the people!” I know people there who are my friends and my children’s friends, my neighbors, my partners, basically good people, honest to God, they’re fine. I don’t even know why I’m dumping my political complaints on you. I think I know you well enough already that you’re not the one to whom I should be venting my political frustration, even though you’re an Israeli, a Jewish Israeli. You can see now that I’m doing what the average Israeli does when he asks me, “So, tell me, what’s with ISIS? What are they all about?” As if the fact that I’m an Arab means I must certainly know the gene, the mysterious gene that makes all Arabs behave the same way. It can be dormant, but you never know when it’ll spring to life, it’s just a matter of time. So I’m sorry for that, but still, Etgar, what’s the Israelis’ problem, why do they behave like that? Do me a favor, just don’t tell me that it’s fear, because that’s a quality I value and admire with all my heart, but fear doesn’t explain discrimination, and fear doesn’t explain settlements in the heart of Hebron or Silwan, and fear doesn’t explain why an Arab village is kept thirsty. So what is it, Etgar?

O.K., sorry for laying all this on you, but you’re the one who started with the corn and the idea that there’s not enough room for everyone. This is where I’d add a smiley face, and I really wanted to ask your opinion about smileys and all those other emoticons. You would think that, as a writer, I’d avoid using them in e-mails and text messages, because on the face of it it’s a second-rate writing style. But, on the other hand, I thought about the first people to use question marks and exclamation points, and how serious writers considered them to be some kind of cheap traitors who used drawings when they couldn’t express their feelings in words. What do you say? ☺

Warm regards to Shira and Lev from their uncle in America. Come visit, there’s room for everyone.

Yours,

Sayed

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*September 19, 2014*

Hi, Sayed,

*Etgar Keret*

Your last letter really was heavy going, but that isn’t your fault, it’s the fault of the situation, which weighs a ton. Just a few days ago, I stopped a very friendly taxi-driver on the street. After showing me pictures of his kids—“They got their good looks from their mother”—he offered me a mint and invited me to watch some clips of ISIS beheadings on his phone—“Be warned: it’s not for the squeamish!”—and then started talking about

making a living. “People didn’t set foot out of the house during the whole war,” he said. “They were in a lousy mood. And when people are in a lousy mood I don’t make a living.” His monologue quickly turned to politics, and, surprisingly, he said, “Enough already. I’m sick of it. A war every year and a half. We’ll never be able to finish them off, so we should give them a country and let them choke on it. Just as long as they leave us in peace already.” Later on in the conversation, he said that in the last election all the candidates seemed like good-for-nothing swindlers, but, in the end, he voted Likud, and in the next elections he’s planning not to vote at all. Which probably means that he’ll vote Likud again.



You asked me to try to explain to you why the injustices you describe continue, and you added that I shouldn’t say it’s because of fear. So I’ll try to explain, even though I’m not totally sure that I understand, and I won’t say that it’s because of fear, because what I felt all around me during the last war wasn’t fear but a general sense of hopelessness and despair.

During the war, I read the results of a poll showing that close to ninety per cent of Israelis are in favor of occupying all of Gaza and bringing down Hamas, but the day before that I came across the results of a different poll, indicating that almost eighty per cent of Israelis don’t believe that occupying Gaza would lead to the collapse of Hamas. Simple math shows that the majority of Israelis who advocate the use of force and more force don’t really think it’ll solve the problem, they just don’t believe there’s an alternative. “Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent,” Isaac Asimov said, and in the last war, for many Israeli citizens, the collective desire to prevail through violence was inspired by the same urge that makes people kick a vending machine that swallowed their money without dropping a can of soda: not because they think it’ll help bring the refreshing liquid closer to their dry lips but because they can’t think of anything else to do.

The explanations I hear from so many of the people I know are: Islamic fundamentalism is growing stronger all over the world, the governments in the region are unstable, and all negotiations will end in the loss of territory without compensation, anyway, because there’s no one in charge there. And that’s only what I hear from people who are trying to be rational. Many others just reject any new idea or initiative by saying something like, “The Arabs don’t want peace, and they won’t stop fighting us until they get Tel Aviv and Jaffa, too.” But all of those dubious claims can’t hide one feeling: despair. And despair is a much more dangerous feeling than fear, because fear is an intense feeling and, even if it can be momentarily paralyzing, in the end it calls for action, and, surprisingly, it can also create solutions. But despair is a feeling that calls for passivity and acceptance of reality even if it is unbearable, and it sees every spark of hope, every desire for change as a cunning enemy.

It's easy for me to understand why so many Israelis have chosen despair. The history of this conflict is endlessly depressing. We've seen so many missed opportunities, shows of distrust, and lack of courage on both sides throughout the years, occurring almost as persistently as a force of nature. But, even if everyone is to blame for the failure, we Israelis—sorry for dragging you into this, too, Sayed, but a thousand green cards won't help you; to me, you'll always be an Israeli—are the only ones capable of beginning a process that will rescue us from this inhuman situation. Israel is the stronger side in this conflict, and, as such, it is the only side that can truly initiate change. And to do that it has to part company with that despair, which, like many other kinds of despair, is nothing but an ongoing self-fulfilling prophecy.

And I believe that it will happen. I believe that this despair is temporary, and that even though there are quite a few political elements that would rather see us despairing, and even though it sometimes seems as if enormous forces are working to convince us that hope is just another word in our national anthem and not a powerful force that can lead to change, people feel deep down that the terrible situation we find ourselves in is not really the only dish on the regional menu. When I look around, apart from the minority of Jewish messianists cavorting on the hilltops and in the Knesset, I don't see people who are happy with the existing situation and are willing to accept it. Only some of them have a moral problem with the occupation, but even the ones who don't realize that until the Palestinian people have a country no one's going to have an easy time of it here. War is expensive, as our Minister of Defense reminded us recently, and each person in this country is personally invested in the next war, with a son, a father, a brother, or a friend who will go into Gaza for the umpteenth time. And the fact that all those people who are not happy still haven't found an effective plan of action or a worthy leader they can follow is only a temporary situation. Yes, this temporary situation is terrible, but, paradoxically, the worse it gets, the more inevitable change becomes.

I know, Sayed, I know that whenever I get excited about something I start to sound like some drunk hippie, so I'll close this letter with a slightly depressing story to balance things out.

A few days ago, Shira told me that Lev said he wanted us to stop talking to people about wanting peace. When Shira asked him why, he was surprised. "Mom, didn't they teach you anything in school? You know who said they want peace? Rabin, Sadat, John Lennon, and they were all murdered. I want peace, too, but I want parents even more." When Shira told me that, I got chills all over my body. Here's this smart and curious kid, eight and a half years old, who last year took part in a much publicized anti-racist Ministry of Education program, and the only truth he managed to extract from the world running wild around him is that wanting peace is dangerous. Sorry, correction: wanting a nonviolent future in which all the inhabitants of the region have self-definition and can exercise all their basic rights is O.K., but saying it out loud or, God forbid, trying to do something about it—that's too dangerous.

Take care of yourself and your family, friend, and I promise to come to visit you soon in Urbana, Illinois, which Lev thinks is the best place in the world.

Etgar

P.S.: And if we're already talking politics, *zalma*, tell me, what's this business with ISIS all about? ☺

*Photograph of Sayed Kashua by Amit Shabi / laif / Redux.*

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Etgar Keret's latest collection to appear in English is "Suddenly a Knock at the Door." His story "Creative Writing ([http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2012/01/02/120102fi\\_fiction\\_keret](http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2012/01/02/120102fi_fiction_keret))" appeared in the magazine.

Sayed Kashua is the author of, among other books, "Dancing Arabs," "Let it Be Morning," and "Second Person Singular."

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