

Pequots, Peki'in and Palestinianism

By William Rabinowitz

“William,” the mistress of the house called an octave higher, the voice emanating from the kitchen. I dropped everything and answered quickly as I had been trained well in our thirty five year marriage. “Yes, dear,” I said quickly calculating Friday is two nights away, Ketubah rights you know.

“You have to go to Publix, Chandler is coming. “

Chandler is our grandson. We love him but at times, we can do without him. He attended a parental bragging rights school, “my kid is at the University of Whoopdeedoo. He is studying communication and sociology.”

Chandler invested his time, and his parent's savings, learning how to talk some addle brained girl into being friendly between drags on the bong. He dropped out three credits shy of a degree. Fully infected by his liberal, Ivory Tower's unemployable, tenured professors, he was given their smicha in anti-capitalism, anti-Zionism and atheism. Compared to Chandler's last visit, my trip to the proctologist was a mecha'yeh, a real pleasure.

“William, I want you to go and buy a good lemon meringue pie, not the cheap one, a large package of Vienna Finger cookies and a supply of fat free, dietetic chocolate fudge bars for me.”

I must admit she still had one heck of a figure for a gal her age.

“And don't forget the toilet paper again; it's on sale this week. Be back quickly, he will be here in two hours”

“Yes dear,” is the only appropriate response. I head out the door. If Chandler is coming on such short notice, he must be short of money again.

I was back after little over an hour of freedom. I declined to have the bagger at Publix carry my shopping to my car. He was older than Methuselah. If I had let him help me, I would have kept my freedom for a week or more. Supplementing Social Security is done by a lot of seniors in Boynton Beach.

Sheila set up everything. She used her white porcelain desert dishes, each with a hand painted flamingo on it, when we entertained outside by the pool. Sheila felt it gave a Florida ambience.

Timing is everything. Chandler showed up fifteen minutes early, sweaty with a black and white checkered kafiya wrapped about his neck. Chandler was showing his Palestinian solidarity with his pro-Arafat neck wear.

“Hi Grandma,” Chandler grinned and gave Sheila a kiss. I got the proverbial smile and three fingered handshake.

“Bubbele, tattele, my sheine mensch,” Sheila bubbled.

Retiring to the patio, out came the lemon meringue pie, Vienna Fingers, fat free chocolate ice cream bar and diet coke.

“Is there anything else” I asked Sheila, looking at Chandler. He stared back. I dived into the pie to keep quiet.

Sheila does amaze me sometimes.

“So Chandler, what’s new? What’s with the schmatch?”

“Just bought it from the Middle Eastern Boutique, online. Do you like it?” he answered with a slight defiance.

“What do you need from the Middle Eastern Boutique, we live in Southern Florida, it’s not hot enough for you?” she asked.

It was more rhetorical than anything, or so I thought. Sheila does not pay attention to the news. She uses the internet to develop her Mah Jong skills and shop from QVC.

I pushed an extra large chunk of pie into my pie hole so there was no room to talk and chew, wondering where was Sheila going.

“Grandma, this is my statement that the Jews have done wrong to the Palestinians. I want to show solidarity with them and their struggle for their rights against the racist regime in Jerusalem.”

I took an extra large fork full of pie this time and shoved it in.

“Bubbele, what did I do to the Palestinians? I live in Florida and mind my own business.”

“Grandma, you did not do anything to them.”

“Then why did you say the Jews did such terrible things to the Palestinians. I am a Jew. Your grandfather is a Jew. Your parents are Jews.”

“Grandma, you did not do anything to them. It was the Israeli Jews that did it.”

“Did what tattele?”

“Stole their land, forced them to live in camps, destroyed their culture, their history. The Israeli Jews are European invaders. They are not the people who lived there thousands of years ago. Those people left Palestine and were lost in the European cultures they intermarried with. The invaders came after World War II.”

“Really bubbele, where did you learn all this important information? “

“I learned it at school, in teach-ins led by my professors.” “I listen to National Public Radio and the BBC. But to be fair, I watch Al Jazeera on the internet. Grandma, the vast majority of college students are anti-Zionist. They are learning. They are aware of the evil that Israel did to the Palestinians. It is self evident that truth is on the side of the majority.”

“Sheine, you have a point. If the majority of people believe something then it must be true, right?” Sheila asked.

“Right,” Chandler felt he had made a convert.

“Tattele, does might make right or truth? We Jews are a very small people. What are we, maybe 13,000,000 Jews in the world? How many Muslims are there, 1,000,000,000? How many Christians are there, 1,000,000,001? Does that make Christianity the true religion because there are more Christians than Muslims?”

Chandler’s face changed. He felt victory slipping away.

“Look Grandma that does not change the fact that the Israeli Jews never lived there. They have no connection to the land.”

Sheila turned to me just as I was about to fill the old mouth with ½ the pie just to keep quiet.

“William what do you think?”

I put down the pie tin that I was about to inhale whole.

“Chandler, let me ask you a question or two so I can understand as well. When you get old, like me, the upstairs moves more slowly. I need to restate things. Maybe, if I put it in a different way, you can help me.

You know Grandma and I like to stop off at Foxwoods, the Pequot Indian Casino in Connecticut when we come north to visit.”

“Yes, so,” he answered. “What have the Pequots to do with the Palestinians?”

“In the early 17th century, the Pequots were the largest, most powerful and dominant Indian tribe in Eastern Connecticut. They numbered about 8,000 people. The Pequots maintained their way of life on many thousands of acres. They were primarily hunters with some farming. With the coming of the Europeans, the Pequots needed to share the land. It was not to be. The Pequots were fierce warriors and resented the Europeans. War was the tragic result. The Pequots were

destroyed, ironically, not just by the European settlers but also by the other Indian tribes who were victimized subjects of the powerful Pequots.

Over the years, treaty after treaty, the whites, pushed the Pequots off of their lands unto smaller and smaller reservations. By the 1970's the Pequot National homeland had been reduced to 216 acres and two old women - Elizabeth George Plouffe and Martha Langevin Ellal. The old women refused to surrender their connection to the land. They valued the land; they said the land was sacred given to the Pequots by God. The State of Connecticut said otherwise and tried to have the national identity of the Pequots taken away as a vanished Native American people.

The Indians fought back. They could not fight in numbers but they could fight for their rights through the legal system. They took the State of Connecticut and the U.S. Government to court. By 1976 they not only won their rights and recognition as a Nation but also began to gain the rights back to their stolen lands.”

“See Grandpa that is what I am telling you. The Palestinians had their land stolen by the Jews – I mean the Israelis.”

“Chandler, the once proud Pequot Nation of Eastern Connecticut had been reduced to two women left living on the land and protecting their titles to it. Because of these two brave women who refused to abandon their ancestral homeland, other Pequots who had been lost in the general white population, began to return home. Life was hard. In 1983, Congress recognized the legal National identity of the Pequots and awarded them funds to buy back 800 acres of their land. Four years later, all Indians were granted the right to run their own lives on their own lands. The Pequots took the chance. Bingo was fine but a casino was even better. No one guaranteed the returning impoverished Indians success to reclaim their homes and build new lives. They did it because they believed in coming back to their land. They built Foxwoods. Today Foxwoods is the single largest and most successful Indian Casino in the country. The Pequots are the richest Indians in the Country. From the most despised, to the top.”

“Guess what?”

“What?” Chandler answered.

“Now that the Pequots are rich and raking in the dollars, the State of Connecticut wants a piece of them for themselves. They would have taken it all but they could not. The Pequots are once again a recognized Nation living on their own land.”

“Chandler?”

“What Grandpa.”

“Do you think that all the Native American tribes should throw out all the settlers that have come into America in the past few hundred years? Should the Indians be compensated for the land instead?”

I could see Chandler had never been asked that question.

“The Indians should demand back their lands,” he said. “Send all invaders back to Europe or Asia or Africa. The Pequots were there first. The Palestinians were there first before the Jews came” he said with passionate certainty.”

“Chandler, you must be pulling our legs. There are over 330 million Americans. If they have not already been, the Native American is entitled to just financial compensation for any direct material losses. 330 million Americans cannot be sent home.”

“The Israeli Jews are European invaders,” he said. They were never part of the land. They never had a connection to the land. Whatever may have been a connection was severed thousands of years ago by the Romans. The Israelites were a different people.”

“Have you ever heard of Peki’in in Northern Israel” I asked him.

“Common Grandpa, Peking is not in Northern Israel, it’s in China,” he said.

“I know Chandler, you are right. Peking is in China. I said have you ever heard of Peki’in.”

“No, and what has that to do with anything, the Palestinians were the first people.”

“Chandler, the Palestinians were not the first people. First peoples were Canaanites, Moabites, Edomites, all kinds of "ites". Each of the "ites" fought and killed each other. All of the "ites" eventually vanished in history, absorbed by other conquering people. There never were any ancient people called Palestinians here. There never was a Palestinian State, Kingdom, people or even a city named Palestine. Search all the historic records, anywhere, even ancient Muslim history texts, it did not exist. If an area is Palestine today, where the vast majority of Palestinian people actually live, it is Jordan. Jordan is Palestine. The British screwed that up.

The name Palestine was created by the Romans to obliterate the Jewish Kingdom of Judah and Benjamin. The name Palestine comes from the Philistines – themselves Greek invaders who settled along a narrow coastal area from present day Tel Aviv to just South of Gaza in the 5th century BCE. The story of Samson and Delilah took place in Gaza. The Jews were living adjacent to the Philistine kingdom. The Philistines made war on the Jews. The Philistines vanished when the Babylonians conquered them and absorbed their population. The Jewish Kingdom was also conquered at the same time but we returned to our lands and rebuilt the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. We had our own language, religion, culture, and a special bond to the land. We reestablished our Kingdom which the Romans destroyed and called Palestine.”

“Fine and dandy Grandpa. What’s with this we stuff? You weren’t there. What do all the laws, customs, culture of then have to do with us today? That was them not us. The Israelites, the Jews as you call them, were exiled and were soon absorbed into foreign lands. There were no Jews in Palestine since Roman times.”

“Not exactly Chandler. The last great Jewish revolt for independence in Palestine was in the seventh century – before Islam was born and the Arabs emerged as a conquering military power out of the Saudi Arabian desert. Six hundred years after the Romans and the Jews were still fighting for Palestine?”

“O.K. Grandpa, the Jews are gone in the 7th century. The Arabs have been there ever since.”

“Is that what you were told Chandler? There is a very old village just off the highway between Maalot and Tzefat. It is named Peki'in. Peki'in is a mixed village of Christian Arabs and Druze today sitting on a hillside overlooking a valley with lots of olive trees. Like the Pequots, the Jews in Palestine were almost, completely driven out. Their lands were taken by stronger aggressive invaders. The Arabs did not come to Peki'in until the 11th century, the Druze not until the 18th. Christians arrived with the Crusaders. Jews have continuously lived in Peki'in since Temple times.

We are a small people who have been preyed upon and oppressed by Muslim and Christian alike for two thousand years. By the middle of the 19th century, the last Jews in Palestine were only a few families living in Peki'in. Because of them, Jews have had an unbroken presence and link to the land for 2,500 years. Jews, like the Pequots, have refused to abandon the land even if only spiritually tied to it. Did you know that? They too refused to abandon the last link to their homes.

Just south of the village is a cave. It is called the cave of Rabbi Simon Bar Yohai. A Carob tree grows at the entrance to the cave. A nearby spring provides water. Legend has it that Rabbi Simon Bar Yohai and his son lived in the cave and studied Torah, hidden from the Romans for twelve years. Miraculously the Carob tree provided enough food and the spring water. Another legend has it that Rabbi Simon Bar Yohai wrote the Zohar there, the foundation of the Kabala, Jewish mysticism. If anything Chandler, it is we who are the lineal heirs to the land and not the later invaders.

Today the Pequots have made their homeland wealthy again. The revenue hungry eyes of the State of Connecticut want it back, certainly a piece of the wealth. Palestine was a barren, unwanted land until we returned to rebuild our soil and released its wealth again.

Chandler this is not about who lived here the longest but who is living where. We are living on our land again. The whole problem today is who can live on the land. We are here. The Muslims do not want us back. We are accused of ethnic cleansing of Arabs. The only place in the Middle East that has freedom of religion, assembly, even the ability to build a house of worship is in Israel.

Jews have been cleansed from areas under Palestinian control. Christians are now being cleansed from areas under Palestinian control. Bethlehem was 80% Christian in 1948. It is 8-10% today. I asked a Palestinian Arab why the Christians have left Bethlehem. He said they left because of economic opportunity. Then why have the Muslims moved into Bethlehem and replaced the Christians? Don't they want economic opportunity for their children?

It was clear that Chandler was not listening. He began playing with the fringes of his kafiya, much like an orthodox Jew plays with the knots on his tallis.

“What are your thoughts Chandler?” Sheila asked.

“They told me that this is one of your techniques to hide the truth about Palestine and the Jews deeds there. They told me you would say that there never was a Palestine. You cannot prove any of this yourself. You wrote the history in the bible to prove your point of view. Jews have never intended to live in Peace with Arabs in Palestine.” He said. “I admit, I never knew about Peki’in. That is only one small place. It proves nothing.”

One more try, I thought. One more try.

“Chandler, you like to do your own research on the net. Is that right? What you read on the net is always true, right?”

“Some things on the net are lies and distortions. I know that”, he answered. “On the net, I can go to Snopes or some other source to verify things. Why are you asking?”

“Did you know that Arab thugs in Peki’in have terrorized the few Jews living there to leave? Four years ago, there were ten Jewish families living in the village near the old synagogue. Local “nationalist” Arabs rioted. Jewish families were terrorized, their cars fire bombed, their homes fire bombed.

A Jewish family from Holland had moved there four months before the trouble began, Ruth and Abel De Jung. The De Jungs were elderly Holocaust survivors. They emigrated from Holland to Peki’in because they wanted to live in a community where Jew, Christian, Muslim and Druze lived together in peace, the way it should be. Their son Gabriel and his wife lived there with their two sons until just recently. Gabriel said that when they first moved in they were well respected. Everything was fine. One day his son came home crying. The children in the kindergarten no longer called him by his name. The children called him al-Yahud (the Jew).

Chandler, they did not call him the Israeli. The kindergarten children called him the Jew. Where would they learn to do such a thing?

Gabriel, his wife Elizabeth, and their two young sons moved out of Peki’in. Ruth and Abel de Jung moved out and were considering returning to Holland. They were the 9th Jewish family to leave. The only Jewish resident left at the time of the rioting was a woman, Margalit Zinati. Her family had lived in Peki’in for centuries. To be accurate there was a time even the Zinati family fled Peki’in. That was during the Arab anti-Jewish riots in the 1930’s. Things quieted down and they returned.

I know you don’t believe me. Chandler, the truth is there, all you have to do is seek it. Don’t ask someone else to tell you what is true. Seek the truth on your own.”

Beads of sweat accumulated around Chandler's neck. Loving grandmother that she is, and frankly a better person than me, Sheila gave Chandler a check for \$250 to help pay his rent. The kaifya was the wrong thing to wear in the humid climate of Boynton Beach. Sheila fretted that Chandler was going to get a rash around his neck.

I hoped he did.

Sheila showed a different side of her. After all these years, there was a depth I had not appreciated before. Our Shabbat was coming up. It was going to be far better than the usual Ketubah rights for us. Who knows, Sheila might actually get to like Norman, our little Cocka'tzu dog. The name sounds like a chicken sneezing. Norman had happily finished the pie plate and licked the dishes clean after Chandler left.