

THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS AND THE PEACEMAKING PROCESS

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Abstract: This article argues that lack of consideration of the historical narratives of Israelis and Palestinians in the peacemaking process helped to create a climate in which both sides, including the respective leaderships, were, in many ways, unaware of the red lines and domestic constraints limiting the other. Distinguishing between ‘historical narrative’ (i.e., the story a nation tells itself about itself) and history, it contends that the traditional view of narratives by politicians and statespersons—that is, that they are an academic luxury and do not fit into hard-headed negotiations—has damaged negotiating possibilities. This article demonstrates by example why historical narratives are of particular importance in this conflict, and that the peacemaking process is unlikely to succeed until they are taken into account in the process and not treated as simply a cultural afterthought.

Keywords: conflict resolution, history, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Middle East, narratives, Palestine, peacemaking, reconciliation

It is commonplace among historians that mainstream Israelis and Palestinians write different histories. It is equally commonplace among negotiators that the different narratives of the two sides are a sometimes interesting, sometimes boring concomitant to their work, but not necessarily relevant to the task of making peace. And it is commonplace among the rest of the population that the ‘other side’ has a self-serving story that is invented for propaganda purposes, one which has no serious relationship to “what happened” and that should not be taken seriously.

What each of these groups is reacting to, in many cases without realizing it, are the separate and contradictory historical narratives of the two sides. Of course, every national group has its own narrative; this is unexceptional. But the time has come to ask whether the (often deliberate) ignoring of the narratives by policymakers, and the ignorance of the narratives by most of the general population, have contributed significantly to the difficulty of making peace between the two sides.

This study is deliberately intended to fall between the schools of history, popular culture, and conflict resolution, as well as international affairs. It partakes of some of the methodology of each of them. Ultimately, it rests on the premise that for a protracted intercommunal conflict involving the passions of two societies for generations to be settled by anything other than complete victory by one side, then both sides must conclude that there has been some closure to the issues that gave rise to it. Put another way, both sides have had their legitimacy as nations and as states under attack for several generations. A true *acknowledgment* by the other side of each side's national aspirations and at least some aspects of the history on which it is based (without, of course, *accepting* the other side's version of history) is essential to convince the mainstreams of both societies that they will be allowed to live in peace.

Of course, using the narratives of the two sides as a tool in peacemaking is, necessarily, only a part of the solution. Without tangible acceptance of major compromises by both sides on borders, Jerusalem, settlements, holy places, and so forth, there can be no peace. However, all of these have important symbolic as well as tangible significance, and this must be acknowledged and factor into the effort to create a durable peace between the two societies.

Narrative

For the purposes of this discussion, 'historical narrative' is defined as how a given society understands its own identity and the events that created and developed it; in simpler terms, the story it tells itself. Thus, it is the sum total of the efforts of teachers, journalists, parents, other informal education, and, perhaps lastly, the writings of professional historians. It cannot be found in any one document, but most people in a society recognize it and, even more important, know what is outside it. As such, any representation of it is inherently subjective, and subject perhaps only to the Potter Stewart test of obscenity, that is, "I know it when I see it. In that spirit, I have prepared what I refer to as a 'distillation' of the narratives of the two sides which appears in the appendix.¹

The concept of ‘narrative’ has been used in a tremendous variety of contexts in the last several decades. It has been explored by Hayden White (1984) and others from the perspective of history, philosophy, and literature. White and others question the use and nature of narrative in the works of professional historians, which is only peripheral to my argument, as my emphasis is on a national historical narrative.

My use of the concept is from a less philosophical perspective. It is related to the still small body of literature which considers a general societal and national narrative to be a factor in a society’s determination as to which direction it should turn.

Professor Herb Kelman (1992), who has been involved in academic dialogue at Harvard for many years, made a similar point shortly after the Madrid Conference of October 1991 which seemed to herald the commencement of a public Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. His suggestion that the two sides recognize the nationhood and the historical narrative of the other side (‘acknowledgment’ is a key word for him, as it is in this article) was, of course, not followed in the Oslo Peace Process (*ibid.*). One can only speculate now, more than a dozen years later, whether such an acknowledgment might have had far-reaching effects. Professor Kelman does not define the term ‘historical narrative’, but appears to use it in the same sense that I do.

Another examination of this issue (Michels 1994) appears two years later in the same journal which printed the Kelman article—that is, the year after the signing of the Oslo Accords. Jeffrey Michels, then a doctoral student in comparative literature, wrote a thoughtful response to Edward Said’s critique of the Oslo Declaration of Principles, pointing out, in contradiction to Said’s claims, that the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) did not, in signing the Declaration, give up its own national narrative or recognize Israel’s. On the contrary, according to Michels, “The declaration legitimizes the Palestinian narrative and paves the way for future reconciliation” (*ibid.*: 30). Utilizing a perspective that borrows from literary theory, Michels notes, “Nationalism itself is constructed as a narrative that privileges its own perspective. Assuredly, nationalism cannot be equated with a single narrative or one particular narrator. Rather, it combines the stories of multiple narrators, which excluding narratives that problematize its national vision” (*ibid.*: 31).

Michels also avoids a definition of historical or national narratives, but notes that “narrative serves a dual function in constructing the national identities of Israelis and Palestinians” (*ibid.*: 31). It should be noted, that Michels explicitly rejects the notion of including narratives within peace agreements (*ibid.*: 36), at which point he and I part company, as will be discussed more extensively below.

A similar and more recent perspective on narrative is provided by Professors Dan Bar-On of Ben-Gurion University and Sami Adwan of Bethlehem University, who have done extensive work on the textbooks on the two sides. They have also prepared a draft, as yet unpublished, of the two narratives, side-by-side for high school students. In a forthcoming article describing their work, they define narrative as follows:

In periods of war and conflict, societies and nations tend to develop their own narrative to explain the conflict, which from their perspective, become the only true and morally superior narrative. These narratives are morally exclusive, [citing Opatow, S. (2001). Moral Inclusion and the Process of Social Reconciliation. *Social Justice Research*, 14, 2, 149–170.] devalue, and sometimes dehumanize their enemy's narrative. If the enemy's narrative is described at all, it is presented as being morally inferior and the enemy is depicted as a faceless entity, immoral with irrational or manipulative views. These narratives become embedded in everyday culture, in the national and religious festivals, in the media and in children's textbooks. (Adwan and Bar-On 2006: 3 [in ms.])

This is the perspective that informs my article.

Obviously, the narratives develop over time, partly as a result of changes in current circumstances requiring different versions of the past, and also as a result of the work of historians in developing new insight and interpretations, based, *inter alia*, on the availability of new documents. For example, although this is difficult to document, it is probable that appreciably more Israelis are willing to agree that unprovoked killings and expulsions took place during the 1948 War than would have done so twenty or even ten years ago. Much of this general recognition is probably based, directly or indirectly, on the scholarly work of Benny Morris ([1987] 2004, 1990) and, perhaps even more so, on his highly publicized interview in *Ha'aretz* on 16 January 2004 (Shavit 2004), in which he both accepted the existence of massacres and expulsions, to the chagrin of the Israeli right wing, and defended them, to the consternation of the Israeli left. Israeli textbooks, another indication of such developments, have also changed considerably in the almost half-century since independence.² During the 1990s, there were much discussed changes in textbooks and even a well-known television series, *T'kumah* ("renewal" or "restoration" in Hebrew), documented aspects of the Palestinian expulsion for the first time on Israeli television. This was vehemently criticized at the time and, after the beginning of the al-Aqsa intifada and the appointment of Limor Livnat as Israel's current Minister of Education, steps were taken to emphasize "Zionist education" and prevent government-sanctioned historical interpretations, which may give credence to Palestinian claims.³

Such changes are also observable on the Palestinian side, though they are perhaps less visible than in Israel. Since the advent of the Palestinian Authority, educational experts have been engaged in much heralded revisions of the Palestinian curriculum (see Brown 2001). However, it is probable that the basic Palestinian historical narrative as a whole has changed little in its fundamental tenets since 1948, for the obvious reason that the Palestinian national movement, unlike the Israeli one, has yet to achieve its basic goal of a Palestinian state. This has remained despite the fundamental changes in the political goal of most Palestinians, and the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization), since 1988.⁴ On the other hand, Palestinian intellectuals, most of whom had no contact with Israelis before the late 1980s, have become much more familiar with Israel and the Israeli narrative (Maddy-Weitzman 2002). Joint academic projects have been the vehicle for much of the interaction between scholars on the two sides (Scham 2000). Rarer have been joint political initiatives, such as the call by professor Sari Nusseibeh for Palestinians to give up demands for implementation of the Right of Return,⁵ or the more recent joint letter in May 2005 by the Presidents of Al-Quds and Hebrew Universities (Sari Nusseibeh and Menachem Magidor, respectively) urging rescission of the late boycott of two Israeli universities called by the British Association of University Teachers (Cowell 2005).

Previous Examples

As academics, understanding is generally felt by us to be a “good thing.”⁶ However, it is by no means intuitively obvious that there is a connection between understanding of narratives, on the one hand, and peacemaking or ending a conflict, on the other. History is replete with examples of conflicts being ended with no concern about the narrative of the other. There is a literature of ‘conflict termination’ that discusses various internal and external shocks and influences that can convince one or both sides to modify their expressed intention to “fight to the last man” (Cosser 1961; Rasler 2000),⁷ though I have found little consideration of the importance of narratives in certain conflicts. Of course, many wars are ended by compromise, without consideration of narratives. I will take two recent examples to show how classic conflictual conclusions are not necessarily relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which, along with other protracted intercommunal conflicts such as Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Sri Lanka, and others, may require development of a new paradigm.

World War II serves as *the* classic twentieth-century model, at least for Americans, of an unambiguous victory by one side in an interstate conflict,

as well as the classic “good” war, as well. While it can certainly be viewed as a national conflict, there was a clear ideological component as well, and the victorious side paid no attention to the German narrative of the time, based on National Socialist ideology, except to stamp it out.⁸ Nor was this resisted by the vast majority of the German population after the surrender in 1945. Germany, in a surprisingly swift turnaround, rebuilt and prospered, while overwhelmingly rejecting its formerly pervasive narrative with comparatively minor exceptions (D. Cohen n.d.).

The situation was slightly more complex in Japan, though the general outlines were similar. For example, General MacArthur found it inexpedient to abolish the institution of the Emperor, despite his original plans to do so. Moreover, while Japan explicitly rejected much of its former ideology, its refusal to repudiate its actions to the extent that Germany did has periodically caused friction with other Asian countries, notably China and Korea. Nevertheless, it cannot be said in either case that the victors modified their own narrative in any sense, nor was much effort spent in coming to terms with the narrative of the vanquished (Rand Corporation 2005).

Likewise, in the Vietnam conflict, which is also familiar but rather more painful to Americans, the narrative of the North Vietnamese/National Liberation Front never had to deal with that of the South Vietnamese and their American patrons. The North Vietnamese won, annexed the former South Vietnam, and re-educated its people. No recognition or legitimacy was extended to how the South Vietnamese saw events. On the contrary, any expression of that viewpoint would, of course, have been met with swift punishment (Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress n.d.). The United States, for its part, as it left, evacuated as many of its prominent supporters as it could, retained its narrative regarding the war, and ignored Vietnam for a generation. The narratives never came into contact. Finally, when middle-aged ex-soldiers returned to reminisce and find Vietnam rapidly developing a capitalist infrastructure, narratives could simply be bygones and safely ignored as a political issue.

These three situations contrast so starkly with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that it is not necessary to belabor the differences, though these differences help highlight the importance of the narratives in the latter conflict.

In the course of the protracted conflict, it gradually became clear to the large majority on both sides that neither side could win definitively, that is, expel or bend the other to its will, in the World War II or Vietnam sense. The Israeli hope that the Palestinians would melt into the surrounding Arab countries did not come to pass; the Arab hope that the Israelis would disappear like Crusaders likewise seems unlikely. The very short geographical distance between the two sides, unlike the situation with the United States and Vietnam, also makes understanding and coexistence essential.

During the same period, Palestinians consciously developed all the attributes of a nation-state except independence. While it was generally argued on the Zionist side that Palestinians were not a “people” in 1948, that has become a minority view, and those who hold it base it primarily on their claim that the Palestinians were not a people in 1948, and thus cannot be not one today. Certainly, the course of Israeli official dealing with the PLO and the Palestinian Authority since 1993 indicates recognition of Palestinian nationhood.⁹

Gradually, on both sides, the conviction grew to majority status during the 1990s that the two state solution would solve the problem. However, when the two parties finally met in a summit at Camp David in July 2000, the primary issues that defied solution were, significantly, those that embodied the historical narratives of the two sides—namely, Refugees/Right of Return and Jerusalem.

Beginning immediately after the failure of the summit and continuing unabated, there has been a cottage industry of explanation articles for the results. The “orthodox” explanation was set out in the original press conference following the summit in which President Clinton stated that Ehud Barak and the Israeli side had been appreciably more forthcoming than Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian side.¹⁰ It soon became Israeli orthodoxy that Arafat refused to make peace, despite the unprecedentedly generous offer by Israel, because he could not, ultimately, accept Israel’s right to exist (Ben-Ami 2001).

Alternative narratives of Camp David were slow to emerge. One of the first, and probably still the best known, is the series of articles written by Rob Malley, an American National Security Council staffer who was present at Camp David, with Hussein Agha, a Palestinian academic. Together they rejected the “generous offer” thesis and spread the blame for the failure on all three sides (Agha and Malley 2001; also Swisher 2004).

While this is not primarily a discussion about Camp David, it should be noted that, in an ironic twist, the failure at Camp David is now the focus of such different narratives (“the generous offer” vs. “Israeli duplicity”) that overcoming it presents a significant major hurdle to peacemakers.

Legitimacy and Ambiguous Nationhood

An immensely important part of the subtext of peace negotiations on both sides is the quest for legitimacy on the part of both parties. As Anne Lesch (2002) notes, “Competing Zionist and Palestinian national narratives underscore the righteousness of each side’s cause while delegitimizing the legitimacy of the other.” For both sides, their own perception of legitimacy

is based on their historical narratives to a greater degree than is the case in other conflicts, thus giving these narratives particular importance. Over time, the historical narratives have also become fused with religious narratives, until the two aspects are sometimes almost indistinguishable.

The national identity of both Israelis (Jews) and Palestinians is intertwined with the phenomenon of exile. Their modern incarnations are inconceivable without it. It is generally agreed upon by historians that Judaism was formed in the first (Babylonian) exile in the sixth century BCE (see, for example, Neusner 1987). The 2,000-year Diaspora, beginning with the destruction of the Second Temple, is what defined Jewish nationhood until the advent of Zionism. The primary goal of the Zionist movement was to “normalize” the people by “returning” to the land that preceded the exile.

Palestinian national identity was also largely formed in the crucible of exile since 1948. An inseparable aspect of Palestinian identity is the experience of exile, whether personal or national (and in many cases both). Historians of the Palestinian people emphasize that Palestinian nationalism was born in the early period of the British Mandate, but received its distinctive stamp as a result of the *Nakba* (Khalidi 1997: 177–209; Kimmerling and Migdal 2003: 216). Of course, Israel is held directly and, generally, solely responsible for the exile and all its consequences by most Palestinians and the usual Palestinian narrative.

This is out of the norm for modern nationalism. Not only in classic European nationalism, but everywhere else in the world, often the main (sometimes the only) possession that a nation seeking to define itself has is presence on the land it is claiming, stretching back some period of time. This symmetrical lack on the part of Israelis and Palestinians, though certainly not accepted by partisans of either side, creates a sense of insecurity in their historical legitimacy that both are seeking to remedy. Their contradicting and opposing historical narratives are their main means of accomplishing this (Avneri and Rouhana 2001; Ross 2004: 15–45; Scham, Salem, and Poggrund 2005: 1–12).

The stated goal of both national movements was thus to return to some version of the status quo ante diaspora. (Of course, the current Israeli goal, given the success of the Zionist movement, is now largely maintenance of much of the current status quo, minus the violence.) These parallel and completely incompatible goals have, to some degree, run up against reality, as shown most dramatically by the political maneuvers and actions leading to and including the whole Oslo peace process. However, it must be recognized that the national narratives have changed much less than the stated political goals.

These narratives include both conventional history and the myths that are so often a part of a national narrative. On the Jewish side, the national

myth is embodied first and foremost in the Bible and Old Testament sacred history, thus taking it far beyond the parochial concerns of a few million people. Palestinians do not have that advantage, but the presence of Muslim and Christian sacred history and sites in the land, most notably the *Haram al-Sharif*, has created an opportunity to fuse the sacred and secular in the same manner as their enemies have done.

Both sides have consistently denied the nationhood of the other. The best known statement is Golda Meir's quip that there was no such thing as a Palestinian (or, alternatively, that she was a Palestinian, producing as evidence her British Mandate-era identity card), but she was simply expressing the Israeli consensus. Likewise, the Palestinian perspective of the same period is expressed in the Palestinian National Charter, originally published in 1964.¹¹

Both governments and the majority on both sides have expressed different views since then. Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat extended mutual recognition to each other's polities, and the elements of the Palestinian Covenant denying the existence of Israel have been declared inoperative.¹² However, crucially, there has been no substitute narrative, merely—and arguably—an acceptance of reality. Neither side feels it has been accepted by the other.

Rashid Khalidi's book on Palestinian identity succinctly expresses the Palestinian view, seeing Israeli identity as secure, but their own as continuously under attack.

In recent decades, the resounding success of the Zionist political project and the resultant successful grafting of modern political Zionism onto Jewish history, with the former coming to be considered the logical and inevitable outcome of the latter, legitimized the resulting syntheses of the two, such that there is a perceived continuity, a seamless transition, between ancient, medieval, and early modern Jewish history on the one hand, and the history of modern Zionism and Israel on the other. Palestinian identity, by contrast, never having enjoyed such success, has since its beginnings struggled for acceptance and legitimacy in the outside world, and even for recognition of its very existence as a category of being. (Khalidi 1997: 147)

A well-informed Israeli-American commentator similarly understands the negotiations about legitimacy. David Makovsky, in an article about the failed negotiations Taba of 2001, wrote, "Arafat believes that to compromise in areas such as Jerusalem and refugees would mean accepting Israel's moral legitimacy. This he will never do, and this is why Camp David and Taba had to fail" (Makovsky 2003: 128).

While the narrative war extends through history, the two main battlegrounds are ancient history, symbolized by conflicting versions of the

Second Temple, and 1948. A third one, more recent, is the Camp David narrative itself, as noted above.

Refugees/Right of Return

The Right of Return is the centerpiece of the Palestinian narrative as, since 1948, probably the most essential aspect of Palestinian identity is being a refugee (Khalidi 1997: 194; Peled and Rouhana 2004). Even some of the 1.2 million Palestinians who are Israeli citizens fit this description (“present absentees,” who live in Israel but were expelled from their pre-1948 homes), and their anomalous reality has also created identity problems, including the experience of exile (H. Cohen 2003; Grossman 1993; Rubinstein 1991).

Jewish Israelis almost uniformly see the Right of Return as an existential danger to Israel as a Jewish state. The figure of about 4 to 5 million Palestinians is generally used as those who would have “rights” under the Right of Return to return to Israel. Given that approximately 5.5 million of Israel’s current 6.9 million population are Jews, a simple arithmetical calculation will easily discover that Israel would be swamped by refugees who are diametrically opposed to the existence of the state, do not share its values and aspirations, and would change its nature immediately and irrevocably.

Palestinians insist that only a comparatively small proportion of Palestinians would actually choose to settle in Israel. Dr. Khalil Shikaki has found that only 10 percent of Palestinians would exercise this right if it were offered,¹³ assuming that other forms of resettlement and compensation were available, as is generally assumed would be the case. (It should be pointed out that Shikaki’s office was attacked and trashed the day he announced this finding; radical Palestinians believed it denigrated from the importance of the Right of Return.)

Shikaki’s findings provide cold comfort to Israelis of virtually any political persuasion. Even if his figures do correctly represent the Palestinian reality, an influx of 400,000 Palestinians who do not know the language, whose knowledge of Palestine/Israel is based on stories handed down from 1948, who see Zionists and Jews as their enemy, would be immensely destabilizing at the very least. Israelis particularly focus on what is delicately referred to as the “demographic issue,” that is, the fact that the Palestinian birth rate is significantly higher than the Israeli rate. If hundreds of thousands of Palestinians did immigrate to Israel, the percentage of Israeli Arabs (also known as Israeli Palestinians), which has remained at approximately 18 to 20 percent since 1948 through massive Jewish immigration, would be seriously upset, even if an absolute Jewish majority were not endangered. In addition, of course, the open-ended aspect of the Right of

Return, which would give all Palestinians and their descendants the indefinite right to return to Israel, would be seen as a naked sword hanging over Israel's existence.

On a purely political level, such a development would be strenuously opposed by virtually all Israeli Jews. Additionally, as a practical matter, it might well be opposed by significant parts of the Israeli Arab population, on whom much of the resettlement responsibility would fall, though they might ideologically approve. In any case, it has no serious possibility of being approved by any conceivable Israeli government.

As Friedman (2003: 62–69) points out in her insightful article, the Right of Return is treated by both sides as a zero-sum proposition. She correctly refers to it as a dialogue of the deaf; as the categories being employed by each side to discuss it are meaningless to the other. She has also perceptively pointed out that Palestinians are “entrapped in their demand to recognize the Right of Return” (ibid.: 67). This is both the difficulty and the opportunity of the Right of Return issue.

What has not yet formally been done is the separation of the Right of Return from the ‘Reality of Return’. It is in the recognition that these are two very distinct issues that the concept of narrative is essential.

For Israelis, as noted above, the Palestinian Right of Return is seen primarily as a direct invitation to the destruction of Israel. However, it goes beyond that and enters an important part of the Israeli narrative, even to the extent of being existential. For Israelis, the War of Independence is seen in pure, almost holy terms. The Israeli narrative regards it purely as a matter of self-defense. What has always been more difficult is to reconcile the flight of 600,000 to 700,000 Palestinians and the refusal to allow their return. In ordinary Israeli discourse, it is accepted that they fled “voluntarily” in order to make room for Arab armies, on orders from Arab leaders. Little evidence of such orders has been uncovered.

Even Israelis who ridicule the idea of voluntary flight defend the refusal of the Right of Return as a matter of allowing Israel to survive. For example, Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg (2003), a prominent liberal American Zionist leader who was in Israel in 1949, notes in his memoirs: “Everyone knew that the official story ... was simply not true” (ibid.: 200).¹⁴ He records how, nevertheless, it became the generally accepted belief, and was not widely challenged in Israel until the writings of the revisionist (“new”) historians in the 1980s.

Yossi Alpher (2001), a prominent writer on security issues and former Mossad official now identified with the Israeli peace camp, reflects moderate opinion in writing: “The demand by the Palestinian leadership that Israel acknowledge, in some form, the refugees’ right of return, appeared to Israelis to reflect an insistence that, at least at the level of principle, the Jewish state was ‘born in sin’ ... But how can Israelis make peace with the

Palestinians when the latter insist on conditions regarding refugees that actively negate Israel's core identity as a Jewish state?"

If it were a matter of coming to a compromise on land or numbers, this might be attainable. However, Israelis are convinced that Arabs are unwilling to accept an essential aspect of Israel—namely, the historical importance of a Jewish state—and would continuously regard it as illegitimate and an inter-loper in the Middle East. Palestinian ambiguity on this issue was a continual source of frustration and suspicion even during the Oslo process.

Additionally, of course, Israelis see any recognition of the Right of Return as starting on a slippery slope. Israeli acceptance of the claim, even in theory, according to this view, would encourage rather than discourage Palestinian irredentism and indefinitely open up Israel to claims by Palestinians seeking to return, even if limited by treaty (*ibid.*).

Unpacking Jerusalem

The equally thorny issue of Jerusalem also comprises a clear tangible element; namely, the control of the biggest city west of the Jordan River, which is also strategically located between the north and south. It is difficult to go from Hebron to Nablus without passing through the Jerusalem area. There is also the control of hundreds of thousands of people. For Palestinians, it is the cultural center of their society, home to much of the intellectual and professional class, and a major economic asset.

However, the symbolic value of Jerusalem outweighs these factors. Both sides see it as embodying both their national and religious aspirations, both their past and their future. Palestinian nationalism has taken a course, not completely coincidentally, quite similar to Zionism, and has increasingly fused nationalism and religion, even for the nonreligious. Thus, even those who would never want to pray at the *Haram al Sharif* or the *Kotel* (the Western Wall of the destroyed Second Temple) feel passionately that to give up possession and sovereignty over those sites would be to betray both their religion and their national aspirations.

An illustration of the damage that unreflective reference to one's own narrative can do was provided by Yasir Arafat's well-publicized announcements that the Jewish Temple probably never existed and, if it did, it was in Nablus (Morris 2001). Arafat was, presumably, repeating a well-worn aspect of Palestinian belief. One may suspect that he had little idea of the real-life damage his words would do. First, this is bad history, as there is every reason to believe not only that the Temple existed, but that the *al-Aqsa* Mosque was built on the site largely because Muslims believed it was the site of the Temple (see Grabar 1978). Second, it was worse statesmanship, as it convinced

Israelis that Arafat would never accept an integral part of their own legitimacy, namely, the Jewish connection to Jerusalem. His statement made all Israelis that much more unwilling to even consider giving up their holiest shrine to Palestinian control. But it is also a vivid example of the connection between the historical narratives of the two sides and peacemaking.

The Geneva Accord, the non-official peace blueprint drawn up with European support in 2003, dealt with this issue by dividing the city between Arab and Jewish sections, and creating a special regime for the 'holy Basin', which includes most of the Holy sites. In contrast to its matter-of-fact treatment of the Right of Return, it devoted a full article to it, and emphasized the holiness of the site to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, thus explicitly recognizing aspects of the narrative of each side (Geneva Accord 2003: Article 6).

The Narratives and Peacemaking

The narratives of the conflict are usually considered "soft" problems of the sort that will fall into place once the real issues are settled. Anyone familiar with the conflict immediately recognizes that Israelis and Palestinians have different versions of their history, but this is usually considered to be a symptom of their disagreements, and symptoms by definition disappear once the illness is cured (see, for example, Wasserstein 2002).¹⁵ The Declaration of Principles, the first public document of the Oslo process, does not discuss the issue of reconciliation at all, based on the assumption that the specifics of assumption would necessarily lead to reconciliation. However, Uri Savir's (1999) book on the Oslo process clearly emphasizes the long conversations in the Oslo woods that preceded the negotiations and allowed him to see Palestinians as people, thus opening the door to direct negotiations. Nevertheless, the document he helped draft was full of specifics, but left the narratives to fate. The vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians thus had no real opportunity to hear and understand the narrative of the other side.

The other important peace documents of the Oslo process, similarly, were long on specifics but short on finding a way for intercommunal understanding. By the time of the Wye Agreement in 1998, \$10 million was budgeted for non-governmental organization (NGO) peace projects, but this money was not a priority, and the first deadline for projects was, ironically, the month after the al-Aqsa intifada began (later extended).

It is only since Camp David's failure that references to the narratives of the two sides appear in the record. The report on the Taba negotiations of January 2001 prepared by UN Special Representative Moratinos did

contain one sentence on the issue. It is illuminating in its vagueness: “The Israeli side put forward a suggested joint narrative for the tragedy of the Palestinian refugees. The Palestinian side discussed the proposed narrative and there was much progress, although no agreement was reached in an attempt to develop an historical narrative in the general text.”¹⁶ It should be noted, parenthetically, that a “joint narrative of the Palestinian refugees” would almost be equivalent to squaring the circle. The fact that this sentence appears shows that it was probably not well thought out.

By the time of the conclusion of the unofficial “Geneva Accord” in October 2003, the problem of narratives began to be recognized, and the Accord does devote a section (Article 7(14)) to “Reconciliation Programs.” However, this is clearly meant as a post-conflict afterthought which would be carried out in a manner to be determined after peace is accepted. Narratives are seen as part of the aftermath of peace. However, the Accord is unusual in that reconciliation is given any space at all.

Gil’ad Sher, who was one of the principal Israeli negotiators at Camp David and a confidant of Ehud Barak, wrote almost two years after the failed summit, “The Palestinian concept [at Camp David] was not monolithic, but can be generalized as based on emotions of justice and grievance, and on the exploitation of political negotiations as an additional phase in a clash of cultures and as an instrument for righting an historical wrong” (Sher 2002).

Sher clearly meant that as a description of a nonviable negotiating position, explaining why it was impossible for Israel to reach an agreement with the Palestinians at Camp David, but if Israel were to recognize and deal with this “concept,” negotiations would have a considerably better chance of succeeding. However, both sides appear to consider the narratives a zero-sum matter. As shown, recognition of any legitimacy to the claim of the other is seen as a prelude to cultural, if not national, suicide. This perception deserves reexamination and needs to be considered as part of any ongoing diplomatic peace process, not as a cultural afterthought.

Recognition of Narratives?

Is it possible to have a compromise narrative that can recognize the national narratives of both sides? Palestinians and some of the Israeli revisionist historians have maintained this is possible. Ilan Pappé, perhaps the most radical of the latter, has written what he calls a “bridging narrative,” in which he argues that it is possible for Israelis to accept such a narrative (Pappé n.d.). Readers can decide for themselves whether this narrative indeed bridges the gaps or is a slightly redone Palestinian narrative.

However, Pappé's attempt raises two major questions about this whole process that are worth considering, namely, what is the role of the historian with regard to narrative, and is a joint narrative a useful exercise?

In the conception of narrative presented here, the historian has one voice among others. Obviously, it is an important one, as, by definition, he or she is, by training and vocation, concerned with studying the past and presenting it through teaching and publication. However, the narrative is the property of the society as a whole. It is not unusual for historians, as with all academics, to depart from the societal consensus and reach different conclusions. That is legitimate, but even if it could be imagined that most Israeli historians accepted Pappé's work, that would probably have only a fairly minor effect on society.

As is well-known, Israel has spawned in the last fifteen years a considerable group of revisionist historians whose work takes into considerable account, though to greatly varying degrees, of the Palestinian narrative (Shapira and Penslar 2002; Silberstein 1999).¹⁷ It has also led to extensive controversy within Israeli society. Since the beginning of the Intifada, the influence of the 'post-Zionist' and revisionist critics seems to have diminished in society, though it is still strong within Israeli universities (see, for example, Livneh 2001).

However, the conventional Israeli narrative, though certainly more malleable than a generation ago, is still unmistakably Zionist (ibid.). New historians have had an effect, but the ethos of the society still holds on to a fairly pristine view of the War of Independence. Thus, Pappé cannot bypass society, even were he to convince all Israeli professional historians to subscribe to his bridging narrative.

It is argued here that Pappé's work has had little effect on the conventional Israeli narrative, while Benny Morris's has been significant. This is precisely because Pappé largely dismisses the Zionist narrative, while Morris critiques it by exposing warts but does not throw it out. It can also be argued that Morris's political shift in late 2004, culminating in his famous (or notorious) interview in *Ha'aretz*, discussed above, where he freely discusses Israeli atrocities in the 1948 war but argues they were necessary, also made his views more palatable to the parts of Israeli society that had completely rejected them.

Of course, it is essential to recognize that Israeli society also embraces a number of sub-narratives, often connected with policy prescriptions. It would be a major misreading of the society to see it as monolithic; the conventional narrative distilled in appendix A includes simply the basics. There is no one 'guardian of the narratives.' Jonathan Rynhold (2001: 33–52) has put forward an impressive typology of Israeli views, denominating them as Ultra-Nationalism, Conservatism, Statism, and Progressivism.

Although not focusing primarily on their historical narratives, the different perceptions of history are inescapable, and dealing with those perceptions, even among Israelis, is a major undertaking.

In the current state of conflict on all levels, a joint narrative between Israelis and Palestinians would seem to be an impossibility. It would necessarily be either so general as to be useless, or, like Pappé's, be so close to the narrative of one side as to render it foreign to the other. On the other hand, the narrative can be understood in appreciably softer terms than those, for example, presented in the appendix to this article.

It is worth noting that Israeli and Palestinian intellectuals did make major efforts to reach out to each other during the Oslo period. Maddy-Weitzman's (2002) chronicle of these efforts serves as a necessary caution as to the difficulty of making peace when peace-oriented intellectuals and academics are too far away from the mainstreams of their own societies. Both groups believed that their counterpart intellectuals on the other side represented a far greater portion of society than was actually the case, and both were angry and disillusioned even before Camp David, and certainly after the commencement of the Intifada, when both sides rallied around their own flags to some degree.

This tale is worth remembering for those who are tempted to over-emphasize the role of the 'new historians' or post-Zionists in general in shaping Israeli thinking. While they have had an undoubted impact on the intellectual class and have brought about a major reevaluation of Israeli historical thought, even for those who do not accept all their premises, their impact on the historical narrative has been much more limited. And most of them would probably not go as far as Pappé in thinking a joint narrative is currently possible. Obviously, the societies would have to change considerably, both in perception of themselves, and in their perceptions of the 'other', for this to be effective.

What Can Be Done?

The policy problems cannot be solved until there is a conceptual change. That is, there needs to be recognition on the part of policy- and opinion-makers on both sides that peace is not attainable unless ideology, as well as territory, is the subject of compromise. This is not utopian; on the contrary, it is both achievable and essential. However, it is not a matter of either side foregoing its national dream. Rather, the Zionist dream, including peace, cannot be fulfilled unless a full Palestinian state is established. Likewise, the Palestinian dream of statehood and independence cannot, under any foreseeable circumstances, be established and maintained

until full, not nominal, recognition of Israel is part of the package, and the Palestinian state is both willing and able to control its rejectionists by whatever means are necessary.

One of the main critiques of the Oslo process as a whole is that large parts of the population, on both sides, did not feel included by them. This was ignored by both Israel and the Palestinian Authority, to their cost. The rejectionists on both sides were neither included nor successfully repressed, and, working for similar objectives though deadly enemies, were the main reason that the peace process failed.

Though the current tendency is to disparage Oslo, the Oslo agreements accomplished at least one major change—it led to the recognition of the nationhood of and by both sides, if not of the narrative underlying the nationhood. Of course, this was the culmination of a process that had lasted forty-five years and more. But it should not be forgotten that it was only in 1988 that the Palestinians, with difficulty, accepted the concept of a two-state solution, and it was only with the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993 that Israel negotiated with the PLO, thus implicitly accepting that the PLO was negotiating on behalf of a people.

This change must not be underestimated. Despite all of the bitterness that has accompanied the breakdown of the peace process, the majority of Arabs, including Palestinians, accept that Israel is there and existing, and that it will be there for the foreseeable future. Likewise, the vast majority of Israelis realize that the Palestinians constitute a nation. Neither side likes this recognition of the other (many feel things were much clearer and simpler when the other's existence was denied), but it is there in popular consciousness.

There are many on both sides who attribute the current situation to that recognition. However, the recognition shows that reality is the midwife of change, and that change in firmly held beliefs is possible. In other words, the problem with Camp David was that it did not, for a variety of reasons, take its own logic far enough and follow Kelman's (1992) advice urging the recognition not just of the other side, but of its historical narrative as well. Both sides have been hoping and assuming that they could sidestep the vexing question of the legitimacy of the other side, since ultimately neither believes in it. Of course, it is unlikely that the Palestinians will acknowledge the historical logic of Zionism or that Israel will accept full responsibility for the *Naqba*. However, the paradigm set in this article requires nothing of the sort. The crucial concept is *acknowledgment*, not evasion and willful ignorance. Both sides, while readily conceding the other exists, would prefer to apply the World War II or Vietnam paradigms, as discussed above, ignoring the fact that they still have to live with the other side. Israelis, in fact, are hoping that the barrier being built between them and the Palestinians will

prevent them from having to deal with Palestinians at all, let alone their narrative. The thesis propounded here predicts that that effort will also turn out to be quixotic.

It is perhaps equally quixotic, but the dialectic process set out here could lead to another result that recognizes and acknowledges the contradictions between the two narratives rather than attempting to overcome or ignore them. The logical result of that might well be an Israeli state that would celebrate Israeli Independence on the fifth day of the Hebrew month of *Iyar*, as it is currently commemorated in Israel, and also acknowledge with sadness *Naqba* Day on the fifteenth of May, as it is currently mourned among Palestinians. Perhaps this might eventually be the only realistic way of putting the conflict to rest.

Notes

1. This chart is taken from my recently published book (Scham, Salem, and Poggrund 2005). Available at <http://www.lcoastpress.com>.
2. Professor Nathan Brown has performed perhaps the most complete academic studies of the Palestinian curriculum. His report, which concludes that the charges of Palestinian incitement against Israel has been seriously exaggerated, is at http://www.geocities.com/nathanbrown1/Adam_Institute_Palestinian_textbooks.htm. The opposite point of view, claiming that Palestinian textbooks are anti-Israel and anti-Semitic, can be found at the Web site of the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (CMIP 2002).
3. See the approving editorial (*Jerusalem Post* 2001).
4. Polls have consistently shown that considerable majorities on both sides have long accepted the two-state position in principle, though of course, at various times, majorities have also accepted violence by their own side. See, for example, the series of polls conducted since July 2002 by the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (<http://truman.huji.ac.il/>). The poll directors are Dr. Jacob Shamir and Dr. Khalil Shikaki, respectively. For the most recent Palestinian poll showing these results, see the Web site of the PSR (<http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2005/p15ejoint.html>). Other polls show similar, sometimes even more optimistic, results. See, for example, the poll dated 10 December 2002, conducted and published by Search for Common Ground (2002), showing large majorities for peace on both sides (<http://www.sfcg.org/News/Dec2002PollRelease-English.pdf>).

5. The Ayalon-Nusseibeh Agreement (Ayalon and Nusseibeh 2002) calls for Jewish “return” to Israel and Palestinian “return” to Palestine (http://www.fmep.org/documents/briefing_Nusseibeh-Ayalon_12-12-03.html).
6. In the sense as used pervasively in the classic by Sellar and Yeatman (1997).
7. Although focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Rasler does not, in her discussion of the causes for the Oslo peace process, focus on changes in ideology or historical perceptions, but rather confines herself to more conventional factors, including (among many others) stalemates, peace initiatives, shifts in public opinion, mutual trust and credibility, and leadership. All of these are demonstrably relevant to making peace. However, I would argue that the deeper factors discussed here helped destroy the process, which was occurring as Rasler’s article was being published.
8. The process of eliminating Nazi ideology was a major preoccupation of the Occupation forces in Germany. See American Joint Chiefs of Staff Directive (JCS) 1067, which provided guidance for reconstructing German education (<http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga3-450426.pdf>).
9. See, for example, the letter from Prime Minister Rabin to Yasir Arafat dated 9 September 1993 (<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Guide+to+the+Peace+Process/Israel-PLO+Recognition+-+Exchange+of+Letters+betwe.htm>).
10. The transcript is available at <http://telaviv.usembassy.gov/publish/peace/archives/2000/july/me0725c.html>.
11. The complete and unabridged text is available at <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Guide+to+the+Peace+Process/The+Palestinian+National+Charter.htm>. The basis of any Jewish right to the possession of Palestine is explicitly denied in Article 20, which reads, in part: “Claims of historical or religious ties of Jews with Palestine are incompatible with the facts of history and the true conception of what constitutes statehood. Judaism, being a religion, is not an independent nationality.”
12. See note 17.
13. Results of PSR Refugees’ Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan and Lebanon, Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research’s (PSR), 18 July 2003 (<http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2003/refugeesjune03.html>). For an analysis of the poll and its interpretation criticizing Shikaki’s methodology and conclusions, see Max Abrahms (2003).
14. Hertzberg (2003: 201) justifies the refusal to allow return after the war since those who did return would have been “a sullen, near-majority, bitter at its defeat, [that] would have been the source of permanent unrest in the new state.”
15. Wasserstein neatly summarizes the history of the specific disagreements between the two sides, but does not consider, in his optimistic analysis, why the convergences are not leading to peace, and does not directly discuss the “intangibles” that are the subject of this article.
16. Moratinos Report Section 3.1 (<http://www.mideastweb.org/moratinos.htm>).

17. See Silberstein (1999) for a positive discussion of the new historians and other “post-Zionist” critics, as well as Shapira and Penslar (2002) for a more negative assessment.

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Appendix: Israeli and Palestinian Traditional Narratives of Their History—a Distillation

Traditional Israeli Narrative (1882–1949)	Traditional Palestinian Narrative (1882–1949)
<p>(a) The legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise of returning Jews to <i>Eretz Yisrael</i> is based on Jewish descent from the ancient Israelites. The Jewish people have inherited their right to the land, religiously, legally, and historically. Jews have always looked and prayed toward <i>Zion</i> (Jerusalem), never relinquished their relationship to the land, and have always maintained a presence since ancient times, despite expulsions. Jews were treated as foreigners and persecuted wherever they were during their long Exile.</p> <p>(b) Zionism was an authentic response to the persecution of Jews over millennia around the world. Jews did not come as colonizers, but rather as pioneers and redeemers of the land, and did not intend to disrupt the lives of the current inhabitants of the Land of Israel. All land for Jewish settlement was legally bought and paid for, often at inflated prices.</p> <p>(c) The Arabs of Palestine were not a national group and never had been. They were largely undifferentiated from the inhabitants of much of Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. They had no authentic tie to the Land of Israel. Many only came for economic opportunity after the Zionist movement began to make the land fruitful and the economy thrive. In all the years of Arab and Muslim control from the seventh century, Palestine was never a separate state and Jerusalem was never a capital.</p>	<p>(a) Judaism is a religion of revelation, like Christianity, and has no inherent tie to a particular land. Jews are not a nation, but rather a community of believers. In any case, any Israelite presence was a short period in the long history of Palestine. Ultimately, religious myths, without presence and possession, are incapable of creating an ownership right. Palestinians are, in fact, descendants of all previous inhabitants, including Israelites. Those Jews living in Palestine and the Muslim world before 1882 were treated well by Muslim neighbors and rulers.</p> <p>(b) Zionism was a European colonialist enterprise, like many in the late nineteenth century, and was a European ideology superimposed on the Middle East. Moreover, it is an ideology of expansion directed towards robbing Arabs of their ancestral land. Arabs were systematically expelled by Zionist settlers from the beginning.</p> <p>(c) The ancestors of today's Palestinians (Canaanites, Jebusites, and others mentioned in the Bible) were there before the Israelites, as shown by both biblical and archaeological evidence. Palestinians have lived continuously in the land since then. Certainly by the 1920s and likely much earlier, there was a Palestinian identity and nationality that differed fundamentally from other Levantine Arab peoples.</p>

Appendix (cont.)

Traditional Israeli Narrative (1882–1949)	Traditional Palestinian Narrative (1882–1949)
<p>(d) Zionist diplomacy legitimately sought a great power patron since Herzl, and found one in Great Britain. True, Britain had its own imperial agenda, but this does not detract from the righteousness of the Zionist cause. The Balfour Declaration was ratified by the League of Nations, constituting a statement of international law approving a Jewish homeland in Palestine.</p>	<p>(d) The British foisted Zionism on the Palestinians, beginning with the Balfour Declaration, as part of their imperial strategy, with no right whatsoever in international law, and this was illegally ratified by the League of Nations. “He who did not own gave a promise to those who did not deserve.” Zionists worked hand in glove with Britain to subjugate the Palestinian people.</p>
<p>(e) The riots of 1920, 1929, and 1936 were instigated by unscrupulous Arab leaders for their own nefarious purposes, particularly the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin Al Husseini. The “Palestinian” population had increased rapidly through immigration of Arabs who were attracted by Zionist economic successes, and the Arab population’s living standards rose rapidly during this period. The British frequently stood aside when Arabs murdered Jews.</p>	<p>(e) All the disturbances were justified and spontaneous revolts by the Palestinian people against the British/Zionist alliance and increasing immigration. The increasing Jewish presence, facilitated by the British, created the resentment that led to the revolts. The British backed the Zionists, who were responsible for and had provoked the disturbances, and punished Palestinians harshly and illegitimately in order to suppress them, in combination with Zionist gangs.</p>
<p>(f) The British, who had been initially supportive of the Zionist enterprise through the Balfour Declaration and the early mandate, began to backtrack early, as reflected in the splitting off of Transjordan in 1922, the Passfield White Paper of 1930, and many other incidents. They definitively repudiated the Balfour Declaration with the White Paper of 1939, and were unabashedly pro-Arab after that point.</p>	<p>(f) The British were always pro-Zionist, except when occasionally forced otherwise by Arab pressure. They conspired with the Zionists to destroy Palestinian leadership in the 1936–39 revolt, thus making it impossible for Palestinians to prepare for the coming war with the Zionists. The White Paper of 1939 had no effect, as it was not enforced. The British deliberately trained Zionist soldiers during the 1936–39 revolt and World War II.</p>

Appendix (cont.)

Traditional Israeli Narrative (1882–1949)	Traditional Palestinian Narrative (1882–1949)
<p>(g) The Zionist movement accepted the UN partition resolution of 1947 in good faith, albeit reluctantly, as it had the 1937 Peel Commission Report recommending partition. War was forced on the <i>Yishuv</i> (Jewish national community) by the Arabs. Solely in self-defense, the <i>Haganah</i> (later, the Israeli Army) took over more land than had been allotted in the Partition Resolution and was justified in holding it, as it would have inevitably become a base for attacks on Israel.</p>	<p>(g) The UN partition resolution of 1947 was illegitimate, as the UN had no right to give away the homeland of the Palestinians. The Palestinians cannot be blamed for trying to hold on to what was rightfully theirs. Compromise was out of the question. The Jewish leadership never genuinely accepted the idea of partition; in any case, expulsion (transfer) was always the plan, as can be seen by the results.</p>
<p>(h) The <i>Yishuv</i> was numerically vastly inferior to the combined Arab population, and it bordered on a miracle that Israel survived the war (“the few against the many”). All Jews realized they would be massacred if they lost, and fought with absolute determination to prevent another Holocaust. Arab atrocities proved they had no other choice. “Purity of arms” was the watchword of the Zionist forces, who were defending themselves and protecting their families.</p>	<p>(h) The Jews had planned for the war, had organized both politically and militarily, had strong support abroad, and were in a much more favorable position when war came. Their armed forces outnumbered all the Arab armies. Palestinians had no infrastructure and no military training, and were attacked and massacred repeatedly by Jewish gangs. Arab “aid” consisted primarily of attempted land grabs by other Arab countries of Palestinian land.</p>
<p>(i) The Palestinians were not expelled. They fled, in most cases, because they were ordered and cajoled by their leaders and the Arab states in order to make room for conquering Arab armies. In many cases, Jewish officials pleaded with the refugees to stay. The Israeli decision to prevent refugees from returning was justified, as otherwise Israel would be destroyed by a hostile Arab internal majority. Ultimately, the</p>	<p>(i) Beginning soon after the adoption of the partition resolution in November 1947, the Zionists began to expel Palestinians from their homes, almost certainly according to a plan (Plan <i>Dalet</i>). <i>Deir Yasin</i> was a planned massacre that succeeded in forcing Palestinians to leave. The <i>Nakba</i> was planned and carried out as ethnic cleansing. The Zionists recognized that a Jewish state could not exist until</p>

Appendix (cont.)

Traditional Israeli Narrative (1882–1949)	Traditional Palestinian Narrative (1882–1949)
<p>responsibility and blame rests with the Arab leadership for rejecting the partition resolution.</p>	<p>most Arabs were expelled, and history proves this was the plan that was carried out.</p>
<p>(j) The refugee issue was artificially kept alive by the Arab states, who deliberately used the refugees as pawns against Israel. The real reason for the continuation of the conflict was the continued refusal of the Arab states to recognize Israeli's existence. Israel has repeatedly offered peace, but not at the price of the destruction of Israel as a Jewish state, which has been the Arab goal since 1948.</p>	<p>(j) The Palestinian people have never ceased to protest against the illegality and immorality of their expulsion, and Palestinians continue to identify themselves as belonging to their real homes in Palestine. The Arab states have repeatedly betrayed the Palestinians, and only grudgingly gave them space in refugee camps. There can never be a settlement without Israel recognizing its guilt and providing appropriate redress. Palestinians in other Arab countries are as much in exile as anywhere else.</p>

Revised and excerpted from Scham, Salem, and Poggrund (2005); chart © 2005 Paul L. Scham.