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[See table of contents](#)

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Reviewed by Elaine Margolin, Hewlett, NY

If there is some special reason Nathan Thrall has devoted much of his life to enlightening the world about the unsustainability of the Israeli-Palestinian situation, he's not telling. Thrall has written extensively about it in the London Review of Books, New York Review of Books, and the New York Times magazine for years, always making the case for ending the obscenity of Palestinian suffering. His earlier book, "The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine" plunges deeply into the heartbreaking reality Palestinians face as they try to navigate their lives.

Thrall worked for the International Crisis Group as the director of the Arab-Israeli project for a decade writing policy papers for other analysts to examine and grew increasingly frustrated that his message wasn't reaching beyond his intellectual colleagues. He decided to try something different. In an interview with Peter Beinart, he was pressed to explain why the Israeli-Palestinian tragedy has taken hold of his life and stumbled a bit trying to respond. He finally blurted out that he felt complicit as an American born Jew for the moral catastrophe taking place and was bothered that American dollars were supporting such oppression.

Thrall decided he needed to find a more human story that would convey his agony about the Israeli government's treatment of the Palestinians. His new nonfiction work, "A Day in the Life of Abed Salama: Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy," contains no polemical discourse of any kind, yet is a masterful exploration of the Palestinian reality Thrall wants the reader to know about. Thrall is a wonderful storyteller.

Thrall remains an almost invisible narrator, as he watches Abed Salama, who is frantically trying to locate his son after learning of a school bus crash that might have involved his five-year-old son Milad. Just a few hours earlier, the family had gathered joyfully in the kitchen, and he watched his son prance around excitedly because he was going on a class trip that would take him to a theme park in Ramallah. It was sheer chance that Abed was home that day instead of at his job at Israel's phone company Bezeq. The weather outside was treacherous and Milad's mother, Haifa, had a bad feeling about the outing, but remained silent because she didn't want to disappoint her

son. What neither parent knew was that the bus that was coming to pick Milad up was in disrepair and the driver inexperienced. No one foresaw that just a few hours later their child's school bus would be hit head-on by a tractor-trailer on its way to a Jewish settlement nearby.

Thrall shadows Abed as he tries to find his boy, frustrated by the endless entanglement of the Israeli bureaucracy. He is stuck in traffic and frantically waves down some Israeli soldiers to beg them to help him get to the crash site, but they refuse and move on. By the time he gets there, all the children and teachers have been moved to various hospitals, except for the charred remains of those who didn't make it. He wants to go to Jerusalem hospital but remembers he doesn't have the correct ID to get through the checkpoint. He goes instead to a medical facility in Ramallah and hears "ambulance sirens wailing, medics wheeling injured children on gurneys, panicked parents shouting and crying, TV crews interviewing hospital staff. Pushing his way through the madness, his breath short, his chest tight, Abed tries to quell his rising terror. But his mind would not comply."

A neighbor calls him and tells him Milad was most likely on a different bus; that he shouldn't worry. He is hopeful but doesn't really believe what his friend is telling him. Later, he would find out that no one came to the crash site to help for a very long time. The first ambulance to arrive was a Palestinian one. Thrall explains how Abed begins to go into a sort of shock; disassociating himself from the traumas taking place before him, and instead fixating on one thought: "Am I being punished for what I did to Asmahan?" who we later learn was one of his ex-wives.

Thrall's narrative falls backwards in time and we learn about Abed's life growing up in Anata during the 1980s. He fell hard for a young girl early-on whose name was Ghazl. He was in love with her, but his family did not want them to marry because they had hostilities towards the family she came from. Anata was a very small place, made up primarily of three families all descended from the same ancestor, a man named Alawi. Alawi was a descendant of the twelfth-century founder of Sufism who had come from Iraq to the al-Aqsa mosque and stayed.

The Anata of the 1980s no longer exists now. Thrall explains how it has been divided up by the Israelis with no regard to the Palestinian villages it destroys. Part of it is still a Palestinian village in the West Bank. These people carry ID cards like Abed had, which limited their access to move around as they pleased. Another part of Anata had been annexed to Jerusalem's Old City and the Palestinians who lived there had a different colored ID card that allowed them to travel to

Jerusalem. When these changes were made, the Israelis made room for four Jewish settlements, several settler outposts, a military base, and a segregated highway so Palestinians and Israelis could drive on separate roads and not see one another. The community pool of Anata was demolished and turned into a nature reserve which the new Jewish settlement communities had access to anytime and was free of charge. Anata residents could go as well, but were required to pay a fee, and had to drive there to get there on a circuitous route that made it cumbersome. These changes had left Anata in shambles. It was a lawless neglected community whose streets were potholed, and buildings were in disrepair. Relatives who lived in the annexed part of Anata had difficulties seeing their relatives who were living in the part of Anata considered to be part of the West Bank, even though they were only a few blocks away. It is impossible to read about the minutiae of inconveniences and humiliations Palestinians are forced to endure without feeling a sense that Thrall is correct in his assessment that the status quo is shameful and must change.

I found myself reconsidering my perceptions about a book I reviewed a few years back called “Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor,” by Yossi Halevi Klein. Klein, an Orthodox Jew, would pray each day on his rooftop terrace while peeking out over the ugly separation wall and thinking about how much he wanted to explain to the Palestinians his love of Zionism and Israel. He recalls being a scared young boy in America who would watch the television news in 1967, praying the Israelis would hold on. I remember thinking Klein a kind and benevolent man, whose paternal grandparents were murdered in Auschwitz, and whose father had barely survived the Nazi war hiding in a hole in the Transylvanian woods. Klein knew the relationship between the Jews and the Palestinians was fractured and imbalanced and wanted to reach out to his neighbors hoping to convince them there was a way forward for both peoples. It sounded very noble, and I’m certain Klein’s intentions were pure, but the book revealed more than it intended to. Klein seemed oblivious to his own entitlements and freedom to move about as he pleased. He never really was able to imagine the Palestinian ‘other,’ he was speaking to: they remained ghostlike; mere abstractions in his mind. The book is organized in the form of letters to the Palestinians. Klein writes: “I call you ‘neighbor’ because I don’t know your name, or anything personal about you. Given our circumstances, ‘neighbor’ might be too casual a word to describe our relationship. We are intruders in each other’s dream, violators of each other’s sense of home. We are incarnations

of each other's worst historical nightmares. Neighbors?" Klein seems more intent upon easing his own conscience than really delving into the possibilities of genuine transformation.

Thrall isn't interested in making nice. He is interested only in what he perceives to be the truth on the ground. He describes the Salama family as a traditional one. Prenuptial relations are not permitted. Most marriages are arranged. Cousins often wed to keep wealth and land in the family. But Thrall finds out that even in this old-fashioned family, Abed Salama had always been somewhat of a maverick. When he was younger, he wanted to go to Russia, but his father forbade it, fearing he would become a communist. When his father finally relented, it was too late; the Soviet Union was crumbling into pieces. Abed is forced to find work in construction. He was married twice and already had four daughters before meeting his third wife, Haifa, with whom he had Milad. Haifa wound up raising his four daughters along with Milad. His two ex-wives were generally in various states of despair. The women in Palestinian families, in Thrall's depiction, are shown to have little to no agency over their lives.

Thrall uses the story of Milad Salama and his father Abed Salama, which he accidentally stumbled upon in a conversation with his children's nanny, to illustrate how the Israeli occupation continues to shatter Palestinian lives. 700,000 Palestinians have been arrested since the beginning of the occupation, which is 40 percent of the men and boys. Thrall writes with a heavy heart: "The damage wasn't only to the affected families, each of them grieving lost years and lost childhoods. It was to the entire society, to every mother, father, and grandparent, all of whom knew or would come to learn they were powerless to protect their children." Thrall believes Israelis aren't trying to make any changes other than maintaining the status quo, as more land is annexed, and new settlement communities are approved. He believes the Palestinian's only chance of being heard is if they would all unite; the ones in Gaza and the West Bank, those who live inside sovereign Israel, and those living abroad. He feels Israelis will not give an inch unless absolutely forced to and is vague about what types of rebellion Palestinians should organize; leaving unclear whether the possibility of violence is part of the program.

I will leave readers to find out the fate of five-year-old Milad Salama. Thrall has written an unforgettably engrossing narrative that forces the reader to confront uncomfortable truths. Thrall puts you right inside Abed Salama's mind as he reflects about the life experiences, he has endured that have brought him to this fateful day. But author Nathan Thrall makes me anxious. He seems

to suffer from a sort of amnesia when it comes to Jewish suffering, and it is this neglectfulness I find hard to swallow. I believe I'm his targeted reader, a liberal Zionist American progressive, who likes to think of myself as fair and caring. I was born eight years after Israel's inception to nervous Jewish parents who didn't attend synagogue, or speak Hebrew, or believe in God. Yet, their primary identification, like mine, was their Jewish identity which they had morphed into modern form. My parents only went to Israel once, late in life, and when they returned, they spoke of its creation as some sort of magical deliverance for the Holocaust and all the other suffering that had befallen the Jews. My parents were children of Jewish immigrants from Russia who arrived in America decades before the Second World War, and by the time of my arrival in 1956, they had already become acclimated American Jews, but it never appeared to me that they considered America their home. It was just a place where we all lived instead of belonged. Belonging wasn't mandatory for them; survival was. My parents are both long dead now and I find myself wondering what my mother and father's reaction to Nathan Thrall's brutal assault on the Israeli government would be. They were good people and didn't want to hurt anyone, but they were realists too and knew how quickly Jewish lives could disappear. I can hear them whispering to me that Nathan Thrall's rantings possess undeniable truths. But it is just a bridge too far for them. For me too.