



# Mohammed Dajani Daoudi

# Evolution of a Moderate

Once a radical Fatah leader, the Palestinian professor has come under fire for taking his students to Auschwitz to teach reconciliation. **By Nadine Epstein**

## IN THIS DAY AND AGE,

bringing a group of students to visit Auschwitz is so common it is barely noteworthy in the annals of experiential education. People from all over the world visit the Nazi concentration camp in Poland, where nearly a million Jews were killed and more imprisoned, starved and tortured. But what is normal behavior elsewhere is abnormal in swaths of the Arab world, where many political and religious institutions actively promote Holocaust denial or at least Holocaust obfuscation.

Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi, a professor at Al Quds University in Jerusalem, found this

out last March when he brought 27 Palestinian university students to visit the Auschwitz death camps. The backlash over this visit underscores the chasm between normals: Although by no means the first Palestinians to visit Auschwitz, the group—in particular, its leader—became a lightning rod for criticism. The 63-year-old founding director of the university's American Studies Institute was portrayed as a traitor to the Palestinian cause.

Dajani is a courtly, soft-spoken man, fluent in American English. When I spoke with him in early May in Washington, DC, he recounted what had happened. "Students marched to my



Mohammed Dajani at Auschwitz in March 2014.

office holding placards that said: ‘Depart you normalizer,’ and handed my secretary a letter warning me not to come back to the university,” he tells me. A journalist in the Palestinian press called him “the king of normalizers.” (“Normalizer” is a derogatory epithet in the Palestinian world, used to describe someone who engages in “normal” relations with Israelis.) “Another journalist accused me of brainwashing the minds of the youth like Socrates.” Dajani pauses and laughs sadly. “And another said that I should have taken the students to a Palestinian refugee camp rather than to a Holocaust death camp. And I should teach Palestinians about the Nakba,” he says, referring to the Arabic word meaning “catastrophe” that Palestinians use to describe the 1948 war.

Dajani is not naïve. He knew there

would be some pushback from the visit—and he was careful to not involve the university—but he was not expecting the outpouring of vitriol. “Over the last three years, I’ve taken my students to Antalya [Turkey] to attend a conference on peace education, and Israelis were there,” he says. “I’ve taken 15 students to Oberlin College, where they studied democratic culture with 15 Israeli students from Tel Aviv University for two weeks, then went to Washington together for a week. Nobody made a big deal about those trips. Now I’ve taken my students to Auschwitz to learn about the Holocaust and what happened, why it happened, what lessons we can learn from it. And suddenly, the whole world is upside down.”

Dajani speculates that timing played a role—news about the trip broke as the latest round of peace talks between

Israel and the Palestinians collapsed—but the response was provoked by an Arabic mistranslation of an article published about the trip in Israel’s liberal daily *Haaretz*. The translated article erroneously said the trip was paid for by two Jewish organizations. It wasn’t. Funding came from the German Research Foundation, and the trip was organized by “Hearts of Flesh—Not Stone,” a project of the Center for Reconciliation Studies at Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, which simultaneously sent 30 Jewish students from Tel Aviv and Ben-Gurion Universities to learn about the Nakba at the Dheisheh refugee camp just south of the West Bank city of Bethlehem. Dajani explains that the Al Quds administration was fully aware of the trip ahead of time, and given the school’s 2009 moratorium against joint projects with

Israeli universities, he had agreed to make it clear to participants that it was not a school trip. Local arrangements were handled by Wasatia—a movement Dajani founded to encourage moderation among Palestinians.

I asked Dajani if he would take students again to Auschwitz after what happened. “Yes, definitely, this will not stop me. On the contrary, I think that it should be done again. And that it should be done also with different sectors within the Palestinian society: religious leaders, journalists and educators.”

We spoke for an hour and a half before he left to give a talk to members of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy think tank, where he has been a visiting fellow in the past. Then he was flying to Los Angeles to give a speech titled “Refusing To Be a Bystander” to the University of Southern California’s Shoah Foundation. Then back to Jerusalem and the Al Quds campus. Despite threats to his personal safety, he shrugged off the need for security. He was more worried that the university’s leaders, who had privately expressed support, had not made a public statement in his defense, giving the impression that he had done something wrong. “I did not break any university rules,” he says. “On an individual basis, professors are allowed to engage in joint ventures.”

Instead, the school had issued a statement distancing itself from Dajani and the students, and some staff members had spoken out against him. One posted online that Dajani had “tricked,” “trapped” and “threatened” his students, adding that he was a “peace-man for Israel and the West” who was “using and abusing his own people for his own personal agenda.” Dajani seemed particularly dismayed that the Al Quds professors and employees union had voted to oust him from the organization, even though he was not a member.

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talk, Dajani decided to tender his resignation “to expose the double-talk we live. We say we are for democracy and we practice autocracy, we say we are for freedom of speech and academic freedom, yet we deny people to practice it.” In his resignation letter, he wrote, “The educational environment on this campus for teaching and learning is not available at your university, which makes it difficult to practice my mission to educate and practice academic freedom.”

He hoped the university administration would refuse to accept his resignation and take a stronger stance on his behalf. But in an official announcement on May 18, outgoing University President Sari Nusseibeh and incoming President Imad Abukishek said they had no choice but to process the resignation. “I believe there was a lot of pressure on them that such activities not be repeated and they

wanted to set an example for other professors,” says Dajani. His resignation took effect June 1.

THE PALESTINIAN view of the Holocaust is complicated. Generally it is seen through the lens of Palestinian history as having a direct causal relationship to the Nakba. Many Palestinians go one step further and consider the Holocaust propaganda to justify the establishment of the State of Israel and create sympathy for Jews. Even Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who recently called the Holocaust “a heinous crime,” once held this view. His 1982 dissertation, published as “The Other Side: The Secret Relationship between Nazism and Zionism,” famously argued that the Zionists collaborated with the Nazis in order to spur more Jewish immigration to Palestine.

There is another widely accepted opinion among Palestinians about this tragic period in Jewish history: It is almost universally equated to the Nakba, says Dajani, who attributes the widespread ignorance about the Holocaust to the fact that the subject is not studied in Palestinian schools. Teaching about genocide has been part of his curriculum for many years, and in 2012, he coauthored a textbook in Arabic with colleagues Zeina Barakat and Martin Rau entitled *Holocaust—Human Suffering: Is There a Way Out of Violence?* “The Holocaust is totally different in goals and scope and method, and the quantity of people,” he says. “Unless students get a better education about what happened, they will keep comparing it to the Nakba.”

After years of teaching, as well as taking students to Yad Vashem and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, Dajani has identified several misconceptions that come from conflating the Holocaust with the Nakba. “I see my students look at the concentration camp as a jail,” he says.



Mohammed Dajani with the group of Palestinian students at Auschwitz in March 2014.

“And then they start to compare it with the Israeli jails. They zoom in on this small picture of somebody being jailed or somebody being tortured. They miss the point of what a Jew sees. A Jew zooms in on the big picture—the Holocaust was meant as the final solution. It was meant to eradicate them as a nation, as a people, as a civilization.” Dajani also tells me about some of the erroneous beliefs the students who recently traveled to Auschwitz with him had upon arriving. “One told me that he thought the Nazis collected Jews in the concentration camps to ship them to Palestine,” he says.

Among Palestinians, there are those who completely deny the Holocaust. (According to the Hamas charter, Jews were “behind World War II” and “the so-called Holocaust is an alleged and invented story.”) “We cannot just keep our head in the sand and say the Holocaust

did not take place,” says Dajani. “It is immoral to deny it. It is actually, historically speaking, wrong to do so. It is also wrong to claim that the numbers are exaggerated.” He rejects the claim that it was just one of many massacres that occurred in the course of World War II. “It was a unique part of the Second World War. Even in a war, you are not supposed to kill a prisoner or kill somebody who has nothing to do with anything.”

One of the most important lessons Dajani believes his students took away from the Auschwitz trip is that genocides don’t materialize out of thin air. “They learned that the Holocaust did not only take place in Auschwitz. It was building up for a long time through incitement against Jews and rising anti-Semitism,” he says. The Nazis needed a scapegoat, he adds, and chose the Jews as well as other unlucky segments of society. “I be-

lieve that this lesson is a very important one for us as Palestinians and Israelis. It’s why we should end incitement in textbooks and the media—in order to not eventually end up with a genocide.”

Barakat, a Palestinian doctoral student at Friedrich Schiller University who did her M.A. at Al Quds under Dajani and collaborated on the Holocaust textbook with him, agrees: “To avoid another atrocity, we need to talk about this and raise awareness about what happened before.” She is saddened when Palestinians dismiss the Holocaust as a Jewish concept or deny that it happened. She compares this to the Israeli education minister’s 2009 decision to ban teaching about the Nakba in Israeli schools and remove the word from the curriculum. “Israel has made a tremendous effort to wipe out the memory of the Nakba,” she says.

Barakat was one of the organizers of the March trip. “I had never been to a Nazi death camp before. It was shocking for me,” says the 32-year-old. “I had read many books on the topic, but seeing it is totally different from reading about it. I think it was a unique experience, and I can feel empathy for the suffering.”

She is horrified at the backlash against Dajani. “Professor Dajani is a courageous teacher. He’s inspiring to all of his students. And all the students who went to Auschwitz with him feel the same.”

The students, she adds, faced pressure from friends and family members before they left, and more when news about the trip broke. Not all of them have publicly defended Dajani but many posted extensive comments about the trip on the “Hearts of Flesh—Not Stone” Facebook page. According to the posts, they felt that being at Auschwitz gave them greater empathy for Jewish suffering, although few interacted with Israelis who were present as part of the reconciliation project. One student, Issa Jameel, told *The Media Line*, an independent online publication in Jerusalem, that he hopes that his professor wins a Nobel Peace Prize.



MOHAMMED Suleiman Dajani Daoudi comes from a prominent Jerusalem clan known for standing up to extremists. In 1529, Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent honored Sheikh Ahmad al Dajani by designating him and his heirs the custodians of the King David tomb on Mount Zion. (This is why family members add the formal appellation Daoudi—David in Arabic—to their names.) In more recent centuries, two Dajanis served as Jerusalem’s mayor between 1863 and 1918, and in 1938, Hassan Sidiq Dajani was assassinated for leading the opposition against the Grand

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Mufti and advocating reconciliation between Arabs and Jews.

Mohammed was born in what was then known as the “Dajani neighborhood” in West Jerusalem’s German Colony, two years before the 1948 war. When Jewish forces arrived, the family fled to Egypt. Their property was confiscated, but the following year they returned to live in the Old City, then under Jordanian rule. Dajani tells me that during his childhood, his parents ran a travel agency and a hotel; his father Suleiman traveled frequently and spoke English, French and Hebrew in addition to Arabic, and his mother finished high school, a high level of education for a woman of her time. They were secular Muslims and sent him, one of four children and the eldest boy, to English-speaking Quaker schools.

As a teenager Dajani idolized John F.

Kennedy, and in search of an American college education, he enrolled in the engineering department of the American University of Beirut in 1964, the same year the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded. Like many Palestinian students, he gravitated to the Palestinian liberation cause and joined the PLO’s Fatah faction, which Yasser Arafat established in 1965. “The idea was to liberate Palestine from river to sea and establish a Palestinian secular democratic state where Muslims, Christians and Jews can live,” he recalls. “At the time my concept was, ‘us or them.’ We were totally against dialogue or negotiations, compromises or any solutions that did not allow the liberation of Palestine.” It was, he points out, the heyday of Arab nationalism. “The feeling was that Israelis were imperialists and plantationists within the Arab world, and as a result, this was a national liberation movement like other national liberation movements.”

Although Dajani trained with Fatah to become a guerrilla, he says he “never fired a shot.” Instead, his mastery of English led him to his position as director of Fatah’s “public relations,” and he disseminated information and represented the organization at conferences. At the university, he was one of the student leaders representing Fatah, and was elected for two consecutive years as president of the student council.

“If you had walked into my office,” he says, “you would have seen pictures of Mao Tse-tung, of Marx, of Vladimir Lenin—big posters—but no founding fathers.” He laughs at the memory. “No Thomas Jefferson, no Western philosophers. My hero then was Che Guevara. I was into very radical politics at the time.”

He remained a student for 11 years in order to maintain his Lebanese residence permit, eventually earning a B.A. in mass communications and an M.A. in English. As the years progressed, Dajani grew disenchanted with Fatah and the corruption and nepotism he observed.

He was also disappointed by Arafat's leadership style. "I was a young idealistic student, and these things contradicted my idealism," he says.



IN 1975, the Lebanese government tired of Dajani's radical politics and deported him to Syria. At this point, he decided to divorce himself from Middle East politics and, he quips, marry academia.

The question was where. As a Palestinian born in Jerusalem, he had held a Jordanian passport, but Jordan had revoked his and other Fatah members' passports during the 1970 Black September Civil War. He was also banned from Israel for 25 years for his prominent role in what was viewed as Fatah's propaganda efforts. So he applied for and was granted an Algerian passport and headed to England to study.

But after visiting his brother Munther, three years his junior, at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan, Dajani did a second M.A. there. He then followed Munther (the brothers are very close) to the University of South Carolina in Columbia, where both worked on doctorates in the government department.

During his student days in the United States, Dajani avoided Palestinian politics and generally kept his nationality to himself. People assumed he was an Algerian, and few knew that he and his brother were related since Munther held a Jordanian passport. "That was the complexity of life for a Palestinian," he sighs.

While a student, he also did his best to avoid meeting Jews. He largely succeeded except for Morris (Moss) Blachman, a political science professor who taught a class in international relations. Dajani recalls having dinner at Blachman's home and hearing what it was like to be a Jew in South Carolina at the time. "Baptists regularly approached the Blachmans and

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told them, 'If you want to go to hell, okay, but let us save your children. Let us take them to church. Let us baptize them.'" He also learned that there were still clubs in South Carolina that excluded blacks and Jews. Blachman, now an associate dean at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine, has been following the news of his former pupil. "It's great to see this kind of courage and the recognition that you don't serve your cause by Holocaust denial and that people have to get along," he says.

When Dajani finished his degree in 1981 (his dissertation was on the Arab oil embargo of 1973-74), he wanted to stay in the United States. "I had a choice of either getting married in order to get a residency, or to do another Ph.D. So I chose the second—I'd say the less problematic choice." (Dajani is single and has no children. He was married once for two weeks.) Munther was now at the

University of Texas at Austin, and once again older brother followed younger. By the time Dajani finished his second dissertation—on international cartels—his father had managed to get him a pardon from King Hussein, paving the way for his return to Jordan.

Armed with doctorates, both Dajani brothers found teaching jobs in Amman, Munther at the University of Jordan and Mohammed at the Applied Science University, where he established and chaired the Department of Political Science and Diplomacy. Despite his proximity to Jerusalem, the Israeli ban was still in effect, and Dajani was unable to cross into Israeli controlled territory to see his family. However, in 1993, his father, who had been diagnosed with cancer, succeeded in obtaining a family reunion permit so that his eldest son could finally return home.



**DAJANI WAS TERRIFIED** when he approached the Allenby Bridge to cross over the Jordan River to enter the West Bank. "To me it was a totally traumatic experience, because this was the first time I entered since 1967," he recalls. "When I came to the bridge, I saw all these Israeli soldiers, and I was very afraid that they would put me in jail."

Once in Jerusalem, Suleiman encouraged his son to broaden his horizons. Suleiman was in the tourist trade, and he had Jewish associates whom he wanted Dajani to meet. Dajani acquiesced but held onto his view that Israeli Jews were his enemies. "I had this negative attitude toward them. I felt that they had usurped my land and were my occupiers. I didn't want to harm them, but I didn't want to have anything to do with them."

Then his father brought him along to his chemotherapy appointments at Ein Kerem Hospital in Jerusalem. "I was expecting that they would be treating him

differently—with discrimination—as a Palestinian, as an Arab, as a Muslim. I found out that this was not the case. They were treating him like a patient. At the same time, I looked around the hospital and found that there were many Palestinian patients with Israeli doctors treating them. This helped me to see the human side of my enemy. It helped change some of my views with regard to Jews and Israelis."

Suleiman died in 1995, but Dajani was to have a second encounter with the Israeli medical system that would further change his views. It took place on the way home from a family outing to Tel Aviv when his mother suffered an asthma-induced heart attack in the car. "We were coming to the Ben Gurion Airport exit, and my brother decided to take the exit to seek medical help," he recalls. "I did not believe that anybody would help her, being an Arab and coming to an airport where Israelis are very keen about security."

To Dajani's surprise, however, the guards immediately called for help and for over an hour, paramedics applied electric shock and massage in the hopes of finding a pulse. His mother was then transported to the closest medical facility, a military hospital, where doctors couldn't revive her.

In the car on the way back to Jerusalem that night, Dajani had an epiphany. "I was looking at her empty seat and I was thinking about her loss, and how in the morning she wasn't even sick, and then suddenly she dies. But at the same time, I was thinking about my enemy who tried to help her. That had a great impact on me in helping me think in terms of us and them, and trying to seek a peaceful solution."



**AT THIS VERY** personal moment, Dajani crossed a major ideological chasm in the Palestinian world—between two very

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different attitudes toward Israel. Simply put, there are those who are willing to deal with Israel and there are those who are not. The latter view is the one that shaped Dajani, along with many in his generation, during his years in Beirut. It grew out of the Arab separatist movement that had cost Hassam Sidiquni Dajani his life in 1938 and snowballed in 1947, when the Arab world—including the Palestinians—rejected partition and then chose not to engage with new Jewish state. Perhaps it is best summed up in the Khartoum Resolution issued by the Arab League in the wake of the Six-Day War: The third paragraph contains what became known as the "Three No's": "no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it."

This approach fell out of vogue after the PLO and Israel signed a mutual recognition accord in 1993, but it reappeared—in a new form—after

the failure of Oslo and the Second Intifada. The Three No's turned into "No Normalization" in the belief that normal relations paper over the injustice of the Israeli military occupation. According to an official Palestinian website, "Normalization is the colonization of the mind, whereby the oppressed subject comes to believe the oppressor's reality is the only 'normal' reality that must be subscribed to, and that the oppression is a fact of life that must be coped with."

This has everything to do with one of the labels hurled at Dajani after the Auschwitz visit: "king of normalizers." "There is the notion among some Palestinians and their supporters that no one should have anything to do with Israelis, and anyone who interacts with Israeli institutions or the Israeli government is a normalizer," explains Hussein Ibish, a senior fellow at the Washington, DC-based American Task Force on Palestine and columnist for *The National*, an English-language newspaper published in Abu Dhabi. "Anyone who engages seriously with Israelis is susceptible to this accusation, but of course it is all fictitious because everyone who lives in Israeli-occupied territories deals with Israel. Even Hamas does. There's no way not to. So it is a purely malicious accusation that is applied selectively in order to question the nationalist credentials of any Palestinian who interacts. It is only used against certain kinds of people, usually liberals and ones doing constructive things like Professor Dajani, in an effort to stigmatize." The term, says Ibish, is used by demagogues both on the far left and religious right: Dajani is equally disliked by conservative clerics and by leftists who support boycotts against Israel.

It all boils down to ideology, says Ibish. In his opinion, the political dividing lines follow what he and others have called "the knowledge constituency

versus the ignorance lobby.” “There is a group of people like Professor Dajani who are knowledge empowerers, and there is another group of people who are horrified by the knowledge of ‘the other.’” He says this is not unique to the Palestinians. “There’s great insularity in the Arab world,” he says. “We don’t want to think about other people in the broader world. It is extremely damaging.”

Ibish sides with the “knowledge empowerers.” Dajani is not the only one, but Ibish lauds him for taking a public stance. “I think Dajani was noble, brave, heroic and is an example of exactly what should be done,” he says. Ibish believes that Palestinian students have a right to know the truth. “They need to know what informs the attitudes of the Israelis who shape their lives,” he says. “Ignorance cripples the Palestinians. They need a sound strategy for dealing with Israelis, and to have that, they have to understand with whom they are dealing. There is really no way to make the case that ignorance is empowering.”

I tried to find Palestinians who would speak with me who would consider Dajani a “normalizer,” but failed. However, in reading through online discussions in English about the Auschwitz trip, I saw posts such as this, from a professor at a university in Bethlehem. After saying that the late Columbia University professor and Palestinian advocate Edward Said had visited Auschwitz, he said, “No one has a problem with a trip to Auschwitz in the right context. Here it was the wrong context: in collaboration with Zionists and accepting their (anti-Semitic attitude) that Israel/Zionists represent Jews and Jewish suffering and so to deal with ‘them’ you had to deal with Jewish suffering. That is nonsense. Zionists actually collaborated with Nazis, and all Palestinians distinguish assiduously between Jews/Jewish suffering and the racist monstrosity called Zionism.”

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THE PALESTINIAN poet Mahmoud Darwish once wrote: “What is more important—a small hope or a big dream?” This line was to come into Dajani’s mind at a moment of need in a new phase in his career.

During the latter half of the 1990s, Dajani trained Palestinian civil servants, first for the United Nations Development Programme, and later for various Palestinian entities. As part of his work he facilitated workshops, which led in 1999 to an invitation to lead a program for Palestinian and Israeli religious leaders in Turkey. This turned out to be a transformative experience for him. “In the first session, they were fighting about who owns the land and accusing each other,” Dajani recalls. “The session was going nowhere, and then I thought of Darwish’s statement and used it to cool things down by asking them, ‘Are you for the big dream or the small hope?’”

“I explained that the big dream for Israelis is to wake up one morning and find that there are no Palestinians around, and they can have Israel and build it and have Jerusalem as the capital. The big dream for the Palestinians is to wake up one morning and find there no Israelis, no Jews around, and they can have Palestine and make Al Quds their capital. The small hope is for both of them to wake up one morning and to have two states, two people, two nations, living next to each other. So the question was, ‘Are you for the big dream or the small hope?’ Now the big dream is immoral, because it implies that you want to wipe out the other. You want to have a Holocaust, you have to annihilate the other. So nobody wanted to be in that position. And so everybody was saying, ‘We are for the small hope,’ although all their body language, all their thinking, was for the big dream.

But they would not dare say so.”

Dajani developed this concept into a conflict resolution model he called “Big Dream, Small Hope,” which over the next few years he presented at conferences and universities in more than 50 countries. He brought these values along when he accepted a teaching position at Al Quds University in 2001, and a year later, started the school’s American Studies Institute, which offers an interdisciplinary master’s degree. (Dajani says he tries to impart to his students “what made America become great; religious freedom and multiculturalism...these are the things I extracted from the American experience.”) One of the courses he taught was on reconciliation.

In 2007, Dajani took his campaign for reconciliation to a new level, in the hopes of addressing growing disillusionment over the peace process in Palestinian society. He cofounded Wasatia with Munther, a peace advocate in his own right. (Munther Suleiman Dajani Daoudi is the dean of Al Quds Bard Honors College and former dean of the Faculty of Arts at Al Quds and director of the Issam Sartawi Centre for the Advancement of Peace and Democracy.)

The idea for Wasatia—which means “moderation” or “the middle path” in Arabic—came to Dajani on a Friday morning in 2006, as he stood on the balcony of his house, which overlooks a checkpoint. He watched as a long line of Palestinians formed at the gate in the hopes of entering Jerusalem to pray. “They didn’t have permits and the Israelis were not allowing them in,” he says. A melee began, and the soldiers pushed the crowd back and threw tear gas. At first, Dajani thought the violence would escalate, but instead a compromise was reached. The officers at the checkpoint arranged buses to take the Palestinians to and from the mosque, and in return, the Palestinians agreed to leave their identification cards at the checkpoint. “This was a win-win situation,” says Dajani. “The Israelis were

worried about security and made sure nothing happened. And the Palestinians wanted to pray and did not want to plant a bomb. I realized these were moderate Palestinians, not extremists, because if they were, they wouldn’t have accepted the deal with the Israelis. My question was, who represents them?”

Dajani is not a religious man, but he has developed his own “radical” reading of the Qu’ran as a source of moderation, positing that Islam, Judaism and Christianity are equal religions in God’s eyes, and teaching that the holy book preaches religious freedom and acceptance of the other. Wasatia disseminates these ideas through conferences and seminars, articles in Arabic-language newspapers, and written materials distributed to imams, mosques, students, academics and other intellectuals. Its website and reach are modest. “I see progress,” Dajani says. “People are now more acquainted with these ideas.” Largely funded by the Dajani family, Wasatia cannot compete with the millions of dollars from various world governments that support other Palestinian religious and political institutions.

His big dream is that one day Wasatia will eclipse Palestinian political parties in influence. The small hope is to help strengthen the voices of moderates within the parties and foster a moderate culture throughout Palestinian society. “That way we can achieve peace,” Dajani says.

When asked if he would consider going into politics, Dajani replies, “Definitely not.” “It was Lord Acton who said, ‘Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,’” says Dajani, sounding like the poli-sci professor he is. “Once you are in politics, you have to do all kinds of twisted things to gain power or to remain in power. You lose yourself. That’s why I would like to be a reformer who can guide our community rather than to politically lead it.”

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DAJANI’S experience as a radical youth in Lebanon immunized him against the idolization of politicians—including Arafat, whom Palestinians lionize as the icon of the their national liberation movement. “I don’t think he led them well,” says Dajani. His study of government has given him a perspective few fellow Palestinians share. “Unfortunately, the Palestinians in the last 100 years had leaders who were leading them to catastrophe rather than to salvation. We started with Haj Amin al Husseini in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, and then we moved to Ahmad Shukeiri in the mid-1960s, and then to Arafat. And now we have Abbas. So basically we have had only four leaders, and we have not had hero models for our youth such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela. That’s part of our problem. We are victims of a lack of visionary leaders. Our leaders did not perceive things in the right way, and they incited us to follow wrong slogans and wrong causes in order to seize power and remain in power.

“So we are where we are, and Abba Eban was right in saying that the Palestinians never lost an opportunity to lose an opportunity. I think that this now applies to our cousins, the Israelis, who are losing one opportunity after the other, regarding peace. They are learning from us.”

Dajani calls for an end to the occupation and the full recognition of a Palestinian state. “He is very strongly for the Palestinian cause,” says David Newman, professor of political geography at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheva, who has served on panels with Dajani at international conferences. “But he doesn’t believe the way

## POEM | MATTHUE ROTH

### SLOW FAST

The slowest fast I ever had  
was the most delicious

The 9th day of Av, 5770  
started 7:45 Brooklyn time  
finished a few days later in Melbourne  
lasted a subway, a bus ride, a flight  
and a 2-hour layover in LA

A Tasmanian exchange student  
offered me banana chips and  
a flash drive of old films  
I politely declined  
but saved the movies  
for later

She left for the snack shop  
I curled up with a prayerbook  
read myself horror stories  
of Jews being burned and buried and butchered  
when she came back I was still alive  
I felt guilty

On the flight to Australia  
I somehow wound up  
upgraded  
Extra inches of legroom,  
cushions that were actually cushiony  
dinner served on cloth

except mine wasn’t.  
No thanks, I told them  
not saying why  
and tried to shift my seat  
into something less comfortable.

In the World to Come, all of us  
living and dead  
will pray side by side  
at the same Temple

I lost myself in my book  
wishing that I  
could share my blanket  
with them tonight.

*Matthue Roth is the author of the picture book My First Kafka, a retelling of three Kafka stories for kids, and the forthcoming picture book The Goblins. His next project is the adult novel Manhattan Beach, a story about Jewish pirates during the Holocaust. By day, he’s a video-game designer. He keeps a secret diary at matthue.com.*

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forward is through violence. To move ahead you have to have dialogue.”

The only way forward, says Dajani, is a two-state solution. This is possible, he says, because the silent majority of Israelis and Palestinians long for peace. “I believe they want to go back to live a normal life, where their worries would be how to put food on the table, how to send their children to school. Just the normal worries of a normal family rather than worrying about occupation, about prisoners and about checkpoints.”

In his eyes, the two-state solution has been sabotaged by radicals on both sides. “In Israel, the big parties have become hostages to the small parties, which threaten they will leave government if there is a release of prisoners or a resumption of negotiations. The problem with Israeli democracy is that in the last two decades these small parties have come to play a major role in the electoral system beyond their size. That’s why [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu is stepping back.

“On the other side, leaders in the Palestinian Authority are happy with this situation,” he says. “It keeps them in power, and they don’t have to call for elections because they can claim that we have problems with the Israelis. So they have an interest in keeping the status quo rather than moving forward toward peace. That’s why I believe the man on the street—the silent majority—should speak up and not remain a bystander.”

There are other Palestinians who have worked for and are working toward peace, but Dajani stands out, says Einat Wilf, a former Labor member of the Knesset who’s now a senior fellow with the Jewish People Policy Institute. In March she published an online article titled “Israeli Leftist Finds a Glimmer of Hope,” about her search for a Palestinian who would be will-

ing to recognize the two-state solution based on the belief that there are two peoples with equal rights to the land, rather than on the reality of power. Dajani was the only Palestinian who reached out to her, she says. She wasn’t sure what to make of him until they met in person at Jerusalem’s King David Hotel. “He talked about how the Palestinians had made a mistake when they rejected the partition in 1947, and that they should have recognized that Palestinians had to share the land. And how he’s promoting moderation. Based on that conversation I was able to publish my piece with a glimmer of hope rather than despair.”

Out of this exchange came a joint statement: “The Jewish people around the world and Palestinian people around the world are both indigenous to the Land of Israel/Palestine and therefore have an equal and legitimate right to settle and live anywhere in the Land of Israel/Palestine, but given the desire of both peoples to a sovereign state that would reflect their unique culture and history, we believe in sharing the land between a Jewish state, Israel, and an Arab state, Palestine, that would allow them each to enjoy dignity and sovereignty in their own national home. Neither Israel nor Palestine should be exclusively for the Jewish and Palestinian people and both should accommodate minorities of the other people.”

Wilf says that Dajani is not well known in Israel, although after the backlash to his Auschwitz trip, Israelis are taking note. “People might think of him as important in the intellectual sense, but they would view him—and he himself would say this—as someone who does not broadly represent the views of Palestinian society.” She thinks he is quite courageous. “Many Israelis recognize the right of the Palestinians to the land and self-determination—maybe 30, 40, 50 percent, so I

operate in the broad mainstream. But for a Palestinian to come out and support Israel’s right to exist today is rare. He considers that he can plant the intellectual seeds for change, even if he is very much alone in the field.”



**WHEN WE FIRST** began talking, Dajani seemed reticent, even shy. But the more we talked, the clearer it became that he is determined to speak his mind and has every intention of continuing to work toward his goals of Holocaust education for all Palestinians, building moderation within his society and peace through a two-state solution. “In his very quiet way, he is quite a ferocious battler for his principles, for which I have enormous respect,” says Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute, who has twice visited Dajani’s reconciliation class at Al Quds.

Dajani has not decided what his next step is now that he has left the university. “He is not going into exile,” says Satloff. “Dajanis have been in Jerusalem for hundreds of years and he is a very proud Dajani. I don’t see him giving that up anytime soon.”

Satloff, like other colleagues, friends and family members, is concerned about Dajani’s safety. “This is a turbulent moment, and someone who is publicly associated with the ideas of tolerance and coexistence is running a risk,” he says. Dajani tells me that he doesn’t travel much in the West Bank and that he hasn’t been to Gaza since Hamas took over. But he says he feels safe in his hometown, Jerusalem. “You have to believe what you believe,” he says. “And I believe that whatever God ordains will happen. So nothing will happen to us, except what has been written.” ☞