



TEACHING PLATO IN PALESTINE

Can philosophy save the Middle East? It can. This, at least, is the thesis of Sari Nusseibeh as I learn from a friend upon arriving in Israel in February 2006. Nusseibeh is not only a prominent Palestinian intellectual and the Palestinian Liberation Organization's former chief representative in Jerusalem, but also a philosopher by training (and, I think, by nature, too). "Only philosophy," the friend tells me he argued during the Shlomo Pines memorial lecture in West Jerusalem three years before (aptly titled "On the Relevance of Philosophy in the Arab World Today"). By the time I leave Israel, I'm convinced that he's on to something.

I am here to teach a seminar at Al-Quds University, the Palestinian university in Jerusalem, together with Nusseibeh, who has been president of Al-Quds since 1995. My idea is to discuss Plato's political thought with the students and then examine how medieval Muslim and Jewish philosophers built on this thought to interpret Islam and Judaism as philosophical religions. I hope to raise some basic questions about philosophy and its rela-

tionship to politics and religion, and also to open a new perspective on the contemporary Middle East.

The texts, I suspect, will resonate quite differently with my Palestinian students than they do with my students in Montreal. Unfortunately, the available Arabic translations of Plato are based on Benjamin Jowett's nineteenth-century English version, itself more a paraphrase than an accurate rendering, which translators sometimes painfully butcher. No doubt, in this respect, things have changed for the worse since the Middle Ages. From the eighth century to the tenth, excellent translations were made of Greek scientific and philosophical texts. It was an impressive achievement: one civilization appropriated the knowledge of another and turned it into the basis of its own vibrant intellectual culture. This, moreover, was not the project of some isolated intellectuals; it was a large-scale enterprise carried out under the patronage of the political, social, and economic elite of the Abbasid caliphate (the second Sunni dynasty that ruled the Muslim empire; it seized power from the Umayyads in 750).¹ After the Greeks, the next significant period in the history of philosophy and science thus unfolded within Islamic civilization. Its main intellectual centers were Baghdad, the residence of the Abbasid caliphs, and al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), the last stronghold of the Umayyads.

I arrive in Jerusalem with the course syllabus, the texts, and an introductory lecture. After a few failed attempts to contact "Doctor Sari" (as Nusseibeh is called here), I decide to simply show up at his office in East Jerusalem.

How well, I wonder, is my classroom *fushā*—the high Arabic of the Quran, the media, and literature that nobody actually speaks—going to work in the street? “Can you tell me where Al-Quds University is?” I venture to ask two passing girls. At first they look puzzled, then they giggle. “You mean Al-Uds University, right?” (The Palestinian dialect, like the Egyptian, almost always drops the “q.”) At the administrative office of “Al-Uds” University I drink a coffee with Hanan, Sari Nusseibeh’s secretary. It turns out that Doctor Sari is traveling in India and Pakistan and will be back only for the second week of classes. “So I’ll have to teach the first class alone?” I ask, a little surprised and a little worried. “I’m afraid yes,” Hanan answers. Then she prints out the information about philosophy seminar 0409438, to be taught by “Doctor Sari and Doctor Carlos.”

I choose to live in Rehavia, one of the oldest quarters in Jewish Jerusalem, known as the quarter of the professors because many European academics and intellectuals (Martin Buber, Shlomo Pines, and Gershom Scholem, among others) settled here—scholars “with a worldwide reputation,” as Israeli writer Amos Oz recalls his father whispering into his ear every time they spotted one on their walks through the neighborhood. “I thought that having a worldwide reputation was somehow related to having weak legs,” writes Oz in his memoir, “because the person in question was often an elderly man who felt his way with a stick and stumbled as he walked along.”² Although as of yet I have neither a stick nor a worldwide

reputation, I'm again renting an apartment here, having already spent three years in the neighborhood as a graduate student, each of them living on a different street: Ibn Ezra, Ben Maimon, and Alfasi. The streets in Rehavia are named after prominent Jewish scholars of another time and place: medieval thinkers whose intellectual world was decisively shaped by Islamic civilization.

The street called Rehov ben Maimon is named after Maimonides, whom many consider to be the greatest Jewish philosopher. Like Averroes, his equally famous Muslim colleague, Maimonides was born in twelfth-century Córdoba, which two centuries before had been the most sophisticated place in Europe. Maimonides and Averroes received the same philosophical-scientific education and became the last two major representatives of Arabic philosophy in medieval Spain. Averroes interpreted Islam as a philosophical religion; Maimonides did the same for Judaism. They are religions founded by philosopher-prophets that not only form the moral character of those who live according to their laws, but also direct them to the intellectual love of God—to physics, the study of God's wisdom in nature, and to metaphysics, the study of God's attributes.³ Maimonides wrote his philosophical works in Arabic, the idiom of science and philosophy of his time. In the instructions he left to a student about which philosophical works are worth studying, he recommends not a single Jewish author. After the Greeks, in particular Aristotle and his commentators, the philosophers he praises are all Muslims: al-Fārābī (d. ca. 950),

who “excelled in wisdom,” for example, and Ibn Bājja (d. 1138), whose “treatises are all good for the person who understands.”⁴ Of course Maimonides does not praise them because they are Muslims, but because they are good philosophers. “One must,” he claims, “listen to *al-Haqq* from whoever says it.”⁵ (*Al-Haqq* means “the truth” in Arabic; it is also one of God’s names.) If someone proposes a definition of an animal species, explains the meaning of justice, or works out a proof for God’s existence, what matters is not whether he is Jewish, Muslim, Christian or something else, but whether what he says is true.

This is an idea I also later discuss with the five young men and three young women who signed up for the class. Does philosophy provide a language with which people can communicate even if they do not accept each other’s religious commitments? Can we say that they are able to do so because as rational beings they can understand and evaluate an argument without regard to the background of the one who makes it? After some debate, most of the students agree that this seems no less valid now than it was at the time of Maimonides and Averroes. They also point to a genre of apologetic literature widespread in the Islamic world today: books that through interpretation locate modern scientific insights in verses of the Quran without regard to the scientist’s background. “Can you give me an example?” I ask. “For example, the theory of relativity,” Ahmed answers. Einstein, I remind them, was Jewish and had been offered the presidency of Israel.

It is interesting to note in this context that Nusseibeh himself taught Islamic philosophy at the Hebrew University in 1979–80. Promoting collaboration with Israeli universities is important to him. In reaction to the boycott of Israeli academic institutions declared by the British Association of University Teachers in 2005, Nusseibeh signed a joint statement with Menachem Magidor, the president of the Hebrew University, in which they “insist on continuing to work together in the pursuit of knowledge.”⁶ On the Palestinian side, this stance meets with little appreciation. A week before I leave, Nusseibeh tells me about a declaration by the Palestinian Union of University Teachers that he should be dismissed from Al-Quds for “normalizing ties with Israel” and “serving Israeli propaganda interests.” “The next thing,” he tells me, “is that they will put me on trial.” It’s not the first attempt to ostracize him. Among the more absurd rumors I hear on campus is that he maintains his position only because the Israeli Security Service, the Shin Bet, protects him. (In 1991, in fact, he was briefly jailed by the Shin Bet for allegedly telling the Iraqi ambassador to Tunisia on the phone where in Israel Saddam Hussein’s Scud missiles landed!)⁷

The controversy about Nusseibeh’s commitment to speaking with the “enemy” is old. In 1987, he was severely beaten after helping to arrange the first meeting between PLO members and members of Israel’s right-wing Likud. The masked aggressors belonged to his own political party, the Fataḥ faction of the PLO. The beating occurred

on the campus of Birzeit University, near Ramallah, where he was a professor of philosophy, after a lecture on John Locke, liberalism, and tolerance.⁸ (So it's not surprising that I never see him without his bodyguards. They inspect the classroom before he comes in and guard the door during class.) The controversy reached a climax after Nusseibeh claimed in an article ("What Next?") that "all rational people" in the region must admit that peace can be achieved only under three conditions: that Israel withdraws to the 1967 borders, that Palestinians concede the right to return to Israel, and that both sides agree on a shared government of Jerusalem.⁹ This position underlies a further joint effort: the proposal for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that he signed in 2002 with Ami Ayalon, the former head of the Shin Bet.¹⁰ Saying in public that reason demands that the land be shared made Nusseibeh (whose mother's family lost everything in the 1948 war) a traitor in the eyes of many Palestinians.¹¹

My first class is scheduled for the same Saturday as the first session of the new Palestinian Parliament, in which Hamas has an absolute majority (a most unwelcome surprise for Israel and the West, although a legitimate democratic decision). In the end the Parliament convenes, but the class is cancelled. Al-Quds University is on strike because salaries have not been paid. For now the more basic needs of material life have halted the dissemination of wisdom.

I try to set up a first meeting with Nusseibeh, who has returned from his travels to mediate the strike. I call his

secretary, who informs me that he's in a meeting and gives me the number of his assistant, who likewise informs me that he's in a meeting and gives me the number of another assistant, who again informs me that he's in a meeting. But it pays to be persistent. The secretary calls me back; we arrange (what else?) a meeting at Nusseibeh's office. He holds lots of meetings. The administration of the university is not a light burden; it does not leave much time for philosophy. "But I've found ways to integrate the two," he explains, "by analyzing philosophically the problems I encounter every day." Administering Al-Quds under the present circumstances is a permanent exercise in practical reasoning. "Nothing is predictable," he says. That's the challenge that keeps him going. "If things would work just fine I'd be happy to go back to a life of contemplation." It makes him a bit jealous when I tell him that I'm sometimes bored with too much time for contemplation in peaceful Montreal. But he hasn't given up on inquiring into God and nature. At age fifty-seven, he says, "I do want to understand for myself how it all hangs together before the end."

During the meeting (and also later in class) the prayer beads of a *subḥa* run through his fingers—not, I think, because he's reciting *al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* (the "Beautiful Names," or ninety-nine names of God). It looks more like a way to relieve tension, like the cigarettes he chain-smokes. He remains silent while his son, Absal, and Huda Imam, the director of the Center for Jerusalem Studies, relate in detail how, on the way back to Jerusalem from a

poetry reading in Ramallah, they were interrogated for hours by Israeli soldiers. Despite Nusseibeh's silence, the complaints about Israeli soldiers' behavior at roadblocks are a recurring theme throughout my stay. For the Palestinians this is a particularly painful experience of the imbalance of power. (More than half of the students miss the class after Israel's Independence Day. Because it is the most symbolic time for attacks, control is correspondingly tight.)

A week later the strike ends and classes begin. Getting to the campus at Abu Dis, a suburb of East Jerusalem, turns out to be a challenge in itself. (Al-Quds also has a campus in the Old City; the problem is that Israel doesn't let the students from the territories cross the border.) It's only ten minutes away from the center of East Jerusalem, but now you need to take two taxis to get there: the first brings you as far as *al-jidār*, the controversial separation wall Israel is building. A massive, nearly five-meter-high piece of this construction suddenly grows out of the street. Nasr, an employee of the university's administration, shows me how to climb over a neighboring garden wall to the other side of *al-jidār*. We wait for a moment while a group coming the opposite way makes it safely to our side. When it's our turn, I'm warned to be careful. (Rehavia scholars with weak legs and worldwide reputations would run into difficulties here, I'm afraid.) From there, a second taxi takes you to the university.

At our first class meeting I don't get very far with my prepared introduction. After a couple of sentences, Nus-

seibeh interrupts me, asks critical questions, and presents arguments for the contrary position. The students are confused—precisely the effect he’s intended. He aims to get them thinking, not just writing down Dr. Carlos’s words of wisdom, and there’s no better way to achieve that than by having two professors disagree in the classroom.

Nusseibeh likes to challenge the students’ intellectual habits. During the semester visiting lectures are presented by several top scholars and artists, such as Joseph Raz, a leading philosopher of law, and theater director Peter Brook, who brings in his troupe from the Bouffes du Nord theater in Paris to stage a South African play—half comedy, half tragedy—about life under apartheid. “Ideally I would like to see the students travel and discover the world for themselves,” Nusseibeh tells me, “spend a month in Florence, learning Italian, visiting art galleries and monuments, and reading Italian literature.” But these students cannot even get to Jerusalem or Gaza. So he tries his best to bring the world to Abu Dis.

At first view, much here seems adverse to a life of contemplation. I wonder, though, if the permanent state of collision, affecting all aspects of life, might not ignite philosophical inquiry into concepts like justice, rights, power, and so forth. Couldn’t clarifying these concepts help navigate the conflict and move toward a solution? I left Jerusalem after completing my doctorate in 2000, shortly before Arafat, Barak, and Clinton met at Camp David. Back then there was real optimism; the solution of

the conflict seemed possible—it was actually poised to happen. In the end, distrust prevailed. Now, in order to eat lunch at the Hebrew University, I have to pass a four-fold control: at the entrance to the university a guard inspects the bus looking for suspicious passengers; after I leave the bus, another guard checks my passport and the letter attesting that I'm a visiting scholar; next my bag is examined and I'm given an electronic body check; finally my bag is examined again at the entrance to the student restaurant. About five young security officers participate in the procedures. At my last visit, more than three years ago, only one old man briefly looked at the bag and asked, "Are you armed?"

The first text we look at is Plato's *Apology*, discussing Socrates's claim that "it is the greatest good for man to talk about virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me testing myself and others; for the unexamined life is not worth living."¹² (Even Socrates's excitement about the afterlife stems from the opportunity it will offer to "examine" the great poets and heroes of the Greek past!)¹³ Socrates's idea of a good time sounds as strange to my Palestinian students as it does to my students in Montreal. What does Socrates mean by the "examined life," and why is it so important? I suggest to them that in Socrates's view living a virtuous life depends on grounding one's life on knowledge. In order to act justly, for example, you must understand justice. "Why can't we rely on the notion of justice transmitted by religion?" Shirin, one of the students, asks. "Can you be sure that this

notion is correct without examining it?” I ask in reply. We go through some standard examples from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where things were done that the agents claimed to be just and religiously motivated, but whose justice is obviously doubtful: from Baruch Goldstein’s 1994 massacre of Palestinians in Hebron and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir in 1995, to the 2002 suicide bombing at Rehavia’s Café Moment where I’d often gone for dinner or drinks as a graduate student.

To illustrate what may have led someone like Socrates to question traditional moral norms, I recount a friend’s description of the beginning of her philosophical quest. She was born into a Jewish family in Jerusalem. Her father worked full-time, and when she was three months old, her mother returned to her work as a flight attendant. With her mother gone for days, she mostly grew up with a Muslim Palestinian nanny. She became fluent in Arabic, called her nanny “mother,” and spent much of her childhood with the nanny’s family. As a consequence, she experienced the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians from both perspectives: the often humiliating treatment of Arabs in Israel, for example, and the pain and anger when one of her aunts was killed on a bus by a Palestinian suicide bomber. Growing up between two narratives that contradict each other led to confusion, and confusion led to the wish to find out for herself what is right and wrong. This, she told me, got her into philosophy.

There was plenty of confusion about right and wrong in Socrates's time. I mention Herodotus's account of how Greeks began to question their customs after encountering other cultures. These customs, they realized, may not be universally valid norms. A funeral ritual considered pious in Greece, for example, was considered an abomination in India, and vice versa.¹⁴ Hence, the Socratic question, what really is piety? But note that this is not about opposing knowledge to religious tradition. Socrates only wants you to make sure that your teachers or preachers told you the truth when they explained the meaning of piety, justice, and other such things.

Although most of the students accept the idea that it is important to examine religious notions in a Socratic manner, their commitment to the truth of Islam leaves no room for confusion. During the discussion, Hassan turns the question around: "How can a secular citizen of a liberal Western democracy live an examined life?" Religious Muslims feel the need to justify the life they choose and to explain why it is superior to that of others. Citizens in the West, on the other hand, experience neither confusion nor the need to seek, like Socrates, objective standards. They often take freedom to mean that each individual chooses how to live according to personal preferences and see all choices as equal. "You're right," I reply, "this kind of relativism makes examination futile. But isn't it the same if you take the truth of Islam for granted?" Perhaps not. I point out that there's much divi-

sion in Islam. “So even if Islam were true, don’t you have to examine its many different interpretations?” I ask. Bilal mentions a famous hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad predicts that the *ummah* (the Muslim community) will split into seventy-three sects. “And only one goes to heaven!” “Which one is it?” I ask. “The Sunnis of course,” he replies. All the students are mainstream Sunnis, the largest Muslim denomination. “Don’t Shī’ites also claim that they’re the only ones who will be saved?” I press on. “Yes, but they’re wrong!” Amreen counters. “How can you be so sure? If you had been born into a Shī’ite family in Iran, wouldn’t you say the same thing about Sunnis?” She points out that about 80 percent of Muslims are Sunnis. “But is truth a matter of the greatest number? Can’t the majority be wrong?” I ask.

After class, Nusseibeh usually gives me a ride back from Abu Dis to Jerusalem. We talk about many things. On one occasion, he tells me that his British wife, Lucy, is sometimes more fond than he is of living in Palestine. She is the daughter of the Oxford philosopher John L. Austin, author of an analytical philosophy classic: *How to Do Things with Words*. Nusseibeh and Lucy met at Oxford, where he earned his undergraduate degree in philosophy, before completing his doctorate at Harvard with a thesis on the metaphysics of the medieval Islamic philosopher Avicenna. After her undergraduate years at Oxford, Lucy converted to Islam, married Nusseibeh, and became a leading activist for peace and nonviolence in Palestine.

On another occasion we discuss education and democracy. How many books could have been translated from Arabic and into Arabic with the hundreds of billions of dollars that the United States put into the Iraq War? Surely we would have reliable translations of Plato to work with. How many exchange and scholarship programs between Western and Arab schools and universities could have been established? For anyone who is serious about democracy in the Middle East, isn't this the way to go?

The example of the Iraq War seems to make one thing clear: democracy cannot easily be imposed from the outside. Of course, democracy doesn't depend only on sharing knowledge. Israel's occupation can't be overlooked, and there are plenty of despots in the region who need to be chased away.¹⁵ But to the extent that democracy means self-determination on the basis of informed choices, developing tools for choosing and sharing information about available options seems the right thing. The key is knowledge and how to use it.

I am not talking about one civilization "educating" another. One suggestion I make in class is that the West and the Muslim world have enough shared traditions to conduct an open discussion on an equal footing. After all, the intellectual configurations of both were largely shaped by the encounter of monotheistic religion and Greek philosophy and science.

But the dialogue doesn't have to be with the West in the first place. Intellectual resources within Islam abound

that allow it to engage in a debate with itself. It's mostly a question of going beyond the monolithic interpretation proposed by Islamic fundamentalists to rediscover the wide variety of positions that were defended in the history of Islamic thought. They range from that of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 925) to that of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Al-Rāzī, who refers to Socrates as “my Imām” in his philosophical autobiography, rejected the authority of revealed religion almost a thousand years before Voltaire, arguing that God provided all human beings with reason sufficient to guide them in life. So there's no need for additional guidance by prophets.¹⁶ Ibn Taymiyya, at the other end of the spectrum, not only rejected certain philosophical positions as incompatible with religion, but attacked even the use of logic as a Greek adulteration of pure Islam.¹⁷ And there are many intermediate positions, one of which we later take up in class: the integration of religion into a rationalist framework.

In today's Arab world, Palestine has one of the better-established democratic traditions. And “democracy” is what most students reply when I ask about their view of the best form of government—before we get to the *Republic*, that is. When they learn about Plato's contempt for democracy, they are at first surprised, not unlike my students in Montreal. Later they point out, with some discomfort, similarities between the government of Plato's best state and theocratic institutions in Iran, such as the Supreme Leader, the Council of Guardians, and the Assembly of Experts. “But isn't the political ideal of Islam a

caliphate with the caliph, the successor of the prophet, as supreme political and religious leader governing the Muslim community according to *sharīʿa* law?” I ask. “Yes,” Bisma agrees, “but the *Qurān* also mentions *shūrā*—the ruler’s duty to consult with representatives of the people.”¹⁸ I suggest leaving aside for now the question of how the consultation mentioned in the *Qurān* compares to modern democratic institutions. “Let’s say there is a basis for democracy in Islam, does that mean that democracy is the best form of government?” I explain Plato’s comparison between a democracy and a ship of fools.¹⁹ “When it comes to steering a ship, would you trust the captain or the majority vote of the sailors?” Everyone agrees: the captain should be in charge. “So when it comes to steering the affairs of the state, should we trust the majority of the people rather than a wise ruler?” “But we’d lose our freedom if all power is in the hands of such a ruler,” Ahmed objects. “So is it better to be free than to be ruled wisely?” I ask.

The *Republic* brings a host of other questions, too. If, for Socrates, to be a just person depends on knowledge of justice, Plato now raises a more fundamental concern: do we have good reasons to choose justice over injustice? This is a radical question in an Islamic context (or a Jewish or Christian one). You can discuss what exactly it takes to be a just person, but not whether walking on “the straight path” (as the *Qurān* puts it in the first *sūra*) is good for you. All of my students take care not to stray from the straight path. (During a break Bisma shows

photos in class, some of which I and the other men are not allowed to see because she appears in them without the veil.) Yet they see how difficult it is to defend the choice of justice for its own sake. (Bisma admits that she would choose injustice over justice once we have clarified Plato's thought experiment, according to which the just person is poor, sick, and ugly, and the unjust not only rich, healthy, and beautiful, but also exempt from punishment.)²⁰

First then we must clarify what justice actually means for Plato. The students recognize the affinity between Socrates's ideal of a life based on knowledge and Plato's description of the just person as one ruled by reason. According to the interpretation we agree on, justice consists in two things: the ability to rationally determine what is best for you and the ability to implement it. For the former you need wisdom. For the latter, however, wisdom is not enough; you need *sophrosyne*, that is, self-control in addition to wisdom. For Plato the human soul is a fairly complicated thing. It consists not only of reason but also of irrational emotions and desires. Without *sophrosyne* these will often oppose the instructions of reason and, in the end, gain control. One example Nusseibeh offers is the inability to conquer your anger in the face of an aggressor, even though you know that not retaliating would serve your interests better. In this sense, *sophrosyne* could make an important contribution to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not only to breaking the vicious cycle of violence that holds the two sides captive, but also to

implementing the idea of nonviolent resistance. Nusseibeh explains how he thinks the concept should be applied in the region: faced with nonviolent Palestinian demonstrations, the majority of Israelis would soon recognize that there's no justification to continue the occupation. And would nonviolence not secure the entire world's sympathy for the Palestinian cause? Not everyone in class is convinced. "Isn't it legitimate to respond to violence with violence? Why should the Israelis get away with it?" Amin wants to know. I suggest drawing a distinction: "If someone kills your child, for example, I can *understand* your desire for revenge, because I'd feel the same way; but that doesn't make revenge *legitimate*. And wouldn't prudence recommend nonviolent means if they're better suited for reaching your goal?"

Socrates was enthusiastic about converting all citizens of Athens into philosophers who would ground their lives on knowledge. Plato was much less optimistic (after all, Socrates was put to death for trying). Obviously, children—but also many adults—are, in Plato's view, unable to consistently guide their lives by knowledge. He thus puts considerable effort into developing a pedagogical-political program as a replacement for philosophy among those who are either not yet philosophers or not philosophers by nature. This program includes, for example, religious stories and laws. Whereas the philosopher knows what justice is, the stories make the concept concrete by telling about exemplary just gods or human beings. In this way they convey a less accurate but still useful no-

tion of justice to nonphilosophers. And while the philosopher's actions are guided by knowledge of the good, the laws prescribe good actions to nonphilosophers.

No doubt, there are many reasons to be suspicious of Plato's intellectual elitism—the division of humankind into philosophers and nonphilosophers. That division is, however, central for understanding the interpretation of Islam and Judaism as philosophical religions. Medieval philosophers were able to apply Plato's model to their religious tradition by interpreting the stories and laws of the Torah or the Quran as a pedagogical-political program that philosopher-prophets had worked out to guide the nonphilosophers in their religious communities. When the philosophically gifted members of the community advance in their studies, they can replace the religious stories from their childhood with accurate knowledge that, in turn, can be reconciled with these stories through allegorical interpretation. It was al-Fārābī who first articulated this idea in the context of Islam. Taken allegorically, true religion and true philosophy coincide. Taken literally, however, religion “imitates” philosophy through stories and laws.²¹ Consider God's representation as a king in the Bible and the Quran. For the medieval philosophers it's a pedagogically useful imitation of the philosophical doctrine of God: as God ranks first in existence, the king ranks first in the state. While nonphilosophers cannot fully understand the ontological order, they do understand the political order. In this way they grasp something important about God.²²

Halfway through the term, during our first class on al-Fārābī, the students ask me how they are doing in comparison to my Montreal students. To be sure, many of the questions they ask and associations they have are different from those I'm accustomed to in Canada. But in many ways they are like all students I've known: some excel, some manage, some struggle. Most of the time, the class discussions are lively and focused. They seem also largely free of stereotypes. Sometimes, out of curiosity, the students ask me personal questions; but neither my Jewish background nor my ties to Europe, Israel, and North America have a negative impact on our interactions, at least not that I can tell. I think one reason for this is that although stereotypes and prejudices are probably not dissolved, they are at least suspended during personal conversation. In fact, one of the two top students in the class is a member of the Hamas faction on campus. Of course the suspension of stereotypes and prejudices is not enough. Dissolving them requires something like Socratic examination. But by calling the stereotypes into question the personal encounter may well be the beginning of such a process.

Al-Fārābī saw himself (and was perceived by later philosophers, both Muslim and Jewish) as the one who renewed the intellectual project of Greek philosophy in the context of Islam. This comes out most eloquently in that he was called “the second teacher” (the first being Aristotle). In order to give a home to philosophy in the Islamic world, one important task, of course, was to clarify

its relationship to religion. For al-Fārābī there is no conflict between the two; for he takes the prophet, the founder of the religion, to be not only the leader of the community but also a philosopher—in other words, something quite close to Plato’s philosopher-king. The prophet provides philosophical instruction to the philosophers in his community and pedagogical-political guidance to its nonphilosophers. Simplifying a bit, one could say that these are the two sides of al-Fārābī’s religion: knowledge and education.²³

So far so good. But there’s a problem that the students become aware of after a while. The most important requirement that al-Fārābī’s prophet must fulfill is intellectual perfection. How is this compatible with the claim that Muhammad is *ummi*—a term normally rendered as “illiterate,” and taken as a proof of the divine origin of the Quran. How could an illiterate person have composed such a sublime book if not through a miracle of God, becoming, as it were, the channel for what the angel Gabriel dictated? The *ummi* issue ushers in a lively discussion. If al-Fārābī is right that divine revelation means attaining complete knowledge, then, indeed, only a miracle can make an illiterate person into a prophet. “But why didn’t God just equip Muhammad with intellectual excellence instead of breaking the normal course of nature?” Usman asks. The students then realize that on al-Fārābī’s view any philosopher (with the necessary poetic gifts) could have written the Quran. Next we consider the question of whether al-Fārābī’s concept of God would allow for mir-

acles at all. God's absolute unity excludes any change in God; that is, God cannot want to interrupt the course of nature now if God didn't want to do so before. "But if he eternally willed a miracle to occur at this time," Ahmed suggests, "then the miracle doesn't imply a change in his will." The discussion continues along these lines for a while.

On the way back to Jerusalem, Nusseibeh shares that he ran into real problems when he taught al-Fārābī in the 1980s as a professor of philosophy at Birzeit University. Because the students did not distinguish between al-Fārābī's position, which he was defending for the sake of argument, and his own position, he was perceived as promoting a heretical concept of prophecy. A few days later an article appeared in the student journal accusing him of introducing "a new prophet at Birzeit." Since then, he tells me, he has never entirely rid himself of the odium of a heretic.

Although al-Fārābī speaks of prophetic religion, he never quite explicitly speaks of Islam. In fact, he has a theory that allows for a form of religious pluralism, though one quite different from those advocated today. For if religion on one level is an imitation of philosophy, there is no reason why a set of true philosophical doctrines cannot be represented by different sets of parables and metaphors. To be sure, the truth is one; but there can be many imitations, some of which may be as good as others. In this sense Jews and Muslims could not only speak to each other as philosophers, but also accept each

other's different religious commitments. The students have no major objections to looking at the literal content of Judaism and Christianity as imitations of the truth, because Islam takes both to be based on valid (if superseded) revelations. But what about Buddhism, for example? If Buddha was an accomplished philosopher and poet, there's no reason, on al-Fārābī's grounds, to say that Buddhism is not a religion that, like Islam, contains the truth, but imitates it in a different way.²⁴

With Averroes and Maimonides, we finally come to the application of al-Fārābī's model to the interpretation of Islam and Judaism as philosophical religions. At first, the students struggle to grasp that Averroes is actually setting forth an Islamic view. The gap between the Islam they know and this philosophical interpretation turns out to be quite difficult to bridge. Hence they often argue that "according to Islam" this or that is the case, for example that there is an absolute limit to human understanding, or that God can hear although God has no ears. Averroes would reject both claims. But instead of engaging Averroes, they take him to be talking about something other than Islam. When, on the other hand, he speaks of *al-Ḥaqq* (truth) as the criterion for accepting what is written in the books of the philosophers, they automatically identify it with Islam, but without at first seeing the twist that, for Averroes, Islamic views are true because they correspond to philosophically demonstrated propositions. In other words, rejecting a proposition of an ancient philosopher in the name of Islam means to reject it

because it is philosophically flawed. As disagreements among philosophers show, they can also make mistakes.

Neither Averroes nor Maimonides openly subscribes to al-Fārābī's religious pluralism. But isn't the fact that they were able to locate the same philosophical worldview in both Islam and Judaism a kind of indirect proof of it? With this the students agree. "But what's your own view of these philosophically reinterpreted religions?" Ahmed wants to know. "Do you buy it?" "There are parts I find attractive," I reply, "but certainly not all of it. I don't believe, for example, that historical religions have a common philosophical core and differ only in how they represent it. For me pluralism requires accommodating real differences." But in other respects, I suggest, we can still learn from Averroes and Maimonides. "If we're genuinely committed to a religious tradition, shouldn't we interpret it in light of the beliefs about the world and the good which, after careful reflection, we accept as true? How else can we do justice to the truth we take this tradition to embody?" "But didn't many Aristotelian doctrines that Averroes and Maimonides endorsed turn out to be completely wrong?" Shirin objects. "Sure," I reply. "So it's very possible that our interpretations will also be overturned in the future. Still, shouldn't we give it our best shot?"²⁵

Ahmed has another personal question for me: "Are you an intellectual elitist who looks down on the dumb masses?" "Well, aren't we all nonphilosophers as children?" I reply. "As for adults: doesn't the effort we're will-

ing to put into rational deliberation vary according to inclination, time and other factors?” To illustrate the point, I ask the students to consider two contemporary problems: global warming and the just distribution of wealth. “Wouldn’t you agree that we can solve these problems only by observing strict environmental and ethical rules? But how many of us have the necessary expert knowledge—about climate change or about ethics and the economy—to come up with these rules on their own?” “So you think we should enforce them by law?” Usman asks. “No, but couldn’t we embed them in religious traditions through interpretation? If you’re a Muslim who also cares about sustainability and social justice—wouldn’t you want these values to be part of Islam and shared by everyone who’s brought up as a Muslim?”

When I leave Israel, the region is once again a war zone—the Second Lebanon War. The excited media display blood, missiles, and body parts; crying families and angry bearded men; soldiers, tanks, and warplanes; ruined buildings and damaged cars; solemn faces making solemn statements. A day before my departure, I call Nusseibeh to discuss the students’ final grades. He sounds depressed. But even if the Middle East isn’t yet ready to be saved, philosophy can make an important contribution—through rational arguments that can be understood and evaluated without regard to religious or national commitments, through Socratic examination that probes the fundamental notions informing our lives, through teaching *sophro-*

syne, which permits us to translate the insights of reason into practice. Not even those who reject the claim that philosophy is universal can denounce this as “Eurocentric.” To be sure, philosophy did not originate in the Middle East; for reasons that I think are contingent, it originated in Greece. But it certainly was integrated into the culture of the region long before the tribes that settled in Europe (Saxons, Franks, Goths, Lombards, and so forth) were seriously exposed to it through Latin translations of Arabic texts.