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Rituals of Apology in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Zohar Kampf

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- 1 In recent years, scholars, writers, and journalists noted that apologies have become a central rhetorical genre in local and global politics. This trend is evident in the frequent expressions of apology, regret and sorrow by politicians, organizations, and states, which lend credence to the claim that we are living in the “age of apology”. Looking at apologies and other reconciliatory gestures made in the context of the Israeli Palestinian relationship reveals that the list includes several demands for apology and few hundreds of expressions of sorrow – a somewhat frail and ambiguous manifestation of moral self-positioning without an acknowledgment of responsibility. In order to understand how apologetic gestures function in the Israeli Palestinian conflict, I analyze in this paper the discourse of and about apology, and its relative speech acts (demands to apologize; refusals to apologize; expression of sorrow etc.), as well as the role of journalists in constructing this discourse. I address two questions: (1) how the political fad of beating one’s breast is relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, (2) how do journalists generate and manage the discourse of apology.
- 2 Before answering these questions I will briefly explain what is public apology and why should we show interest in apologies? As mentioned above, in recent years the discourse of apologies – evident in the frequent demand for apologies, and of expressions of apology, regret and sorrow by politicians, organizations, and states – have become prominent in local and global politics (Brooks, 1999; Gibney *et al*, 2007; Kampf, 2009a Löwenheim, 2009; Kampf and Löwenheim, 2012). Following this discursive development, public apologies have become ‘hot’ topic studied in a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, political science, international relations, sociology, discourse studies, communications, and law. Most of the scholarly work on apologies is based on speech act theory and the category of expressive speech acts (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985). This

category includes apologies, regrets and expressions of sorrow, among other acts – all of which points to the psychological state of a speaker. Many scholars have also used Goffman's notions of face and remedial acts (1971). In this theoretical context, we can point on three attributes of expressive speech acts that function as remedial acts in conflictual discourse:

- 3 Remedial acts as social indicators: Apologies, regrets and expression of sorrow serve as an explicit manifestation of moral self positioning of a speaker vis-à-vis his/her act (was there a violation of norms?) and his/her victim (does s/he worth a remedial act?). At the societal level, as Lakoff notes, through concentrating on apologies "... located in a specific cultural and societal time and place, we can come to understand a great deal about who we are, what we want, and the rules and the assumptions that bind us together as a society." (Lakoff, 2001: 212).
- 4 Remedial acts as settling conflictual processes: Reconciliatory gestures are embedded within a critical point of an evolving conflictual process (Goffman, 1971; Tavuchis, 1991). The performance of a remedial act brings attention to a transgression made in the past by an offender, who regrets his deed and acknowledges responsibility for its realization in the present, with the goal of receiving forgiveness and being re-included into the social structure in the future. Ideally, at the end of the reconciliatory process there is a restoration of equilibrium to the social order.
- 5 Remedial acts and Responsibility (or lack thereof): A formal apology demands a clear acknowledgment of responsibility by the offender, which may lead to the restoration of relationship with the offended party (Olshtain, 1989; Tavuchis, 1991). However, micro analysis of apologies reveals that offenders tend to minimize responsibility for misdeeds by using several strategies: they can use ambiguous apology verbs (such as sorry), blur the nature of the offense, question the identity of the offended party and/or raise doubt regarding the identity of the offender. By using these strategies, they transform expressions of apologies to non-apologies (Kampf, 2009b)
- 6 When remedial acts like apologies are extracted from the private sphere and issued in the public domain, the logic of realization and the dynamic of the reconciliatory process are changed (Tavuchis, 1991). Here, the media plays a crucial role by, first, transferring words to heterogeneous audiences, which are not necessarily connected to the same normative system of rules and assumptions as the offender and the offended.
- 7 The presence of the many may create a "punitive atmosphere," as sometimes the main goal of indirect participants is to humiliate the wrongdoer. Second, the involvement of the media "front stages" the reputation of the offender and turns him into a performer who seeks to restore his image. The emphasis on one's public image leads to totally different considerations in realizing apologetic statements. The outcome of the will or the obligation to perform a reconciliatory act is a realization that lacks the sincerity and authenticity which characterize apologies in the private sphere. Third, the media document the apologetic statement in a kind of public quotation archive. The documentation "on record" of speech acts creates a definitive version of story with a clear offender and victim. It also enables others, including journalists and rival politicians, to cite the apology in any case of the same occurrence in the future. This practice reduces the freedom of actions of public figures, thus encouraging them to use equivocal and calculated language. Last is the judicial and formal stance of words. In cases in which the apologizer has violated a criminal law, issuing an apology, may endure

material or other severe consequences, such as financial restitution or dismissal from a political role (Wagatsuma and Rosett, 1986).

- 8 These factors pose an avoidance dilemma (Bavelas, 1990) for public figures and organizations, wishing to issue an apology without suffering from its consequences. This dilemma compels them to consider linguistic strategies which are best fit to placate the victim without posing a dangerous threat to their own image and interests. In doing so, they become linguistic acrobats, creatively using various strategies in order to reduce their responsibility for the events under public discussion.

How the discourse of apologies is relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

- 9 We can now turn to the first question: How the political fad of beating one's breast is relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? During the last two decades, the media have frequently reported public figures and organizations demanding apologies and expressing sorrow for different types of violations, two of which are relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

- 10 1. Expressions of sorrow for *severe short-term transgressions*, such as "collateral damage". Such expressions were made frequently by the IDF spokesman and by political representatives following the killing of civilians during the second Intifada. In fact, since the Kaffar Kana incident in 1996, in which more than 100 Palestinians refugees were killed, expressing sorrow is the most frequent response by Israeli officials.

- 11 What is the reason for using such non-responsible expressions of sorrow? Severe transgressions make a necessity to issue a response, thereby posing an avoidance dilemma for Israeli spokesmen. On the one hand, not apologizing for killings would violate international expectations to display appropriate moral stance in view of a grave offense. On the other hand, apologizing would be an admission of violating an international law and may expose Israel to liability in future litigations. The way out is to try to satisfy all involved parties by using equivocal language. The *sorry* verb is ideal for this mission as it contains not less than six meanings and functions, thus allowing perpetrators to admit and avoid responsibility at the same time (Kampf and Blum-Kulka, 2011): (1) general expression of sorrow (sorry for what happened); (2) apology; (3) expression of sympathy (4) disapproval; (5) denial of the need to apologize, and (6) expression of regret.¹

- 12 2. A second relevant type of response is an expression of regret for *severe long-term transgressions*, such as past discrimination, exploitation, and deportation. The literature suggests that Israel has played a pivotal role in the global practice of apology as the representative of Jewish victims (Kampf, 2012). As such, Israel was an addressee of historical apologies, mainly from European states for their actions during the Holocaust. However, since the initiation of the Oslo peace process, Israel has been urged to take the role of the apologizer and acknowledge its responsibility for the suffering of the Palestinians.

- 13 Demands for an Israeli apology were manifested several times during the 1990s in the intermediate agreements with the Palestinians (Cairo agreements in 1994; Hebron agreement in 1997 and the Wye River Memorandum in 1998). Several calls to Israel to advance its discourse of recognition were also made in the open public discourses. One

example, is a column by Edward Said in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* (1995), calling Israelis to follow the example of Jacques Chirac's apology for the Vichy regime's conduct in WWII, and to issue an apology for "the wrong done by their government against a relatively innocent people". The second, with possibly greater impact on Israeli discourse of recognition, was the public debate that erupted in 1998, 50 years following the "Naqba," about the need to face up with the "Palestinian suffering."

- 14 Israel responded to these calls, again, with an expression of sorrow. 30 years following Golda Meir's interviews to the British Independent Television (ITV) in which she declared, "There is no such thing that can be entitled Palestinian people", PM Ehud Barak's words in 1999 can be regarded as a milestone in the Israeli discourse of recognition. Barak's statement in the parliament's plenum, "We are sorry for the heavy suffering the conflict caused, not only to us, but also to all of the Arab nations that fought against us, including the Palestinians...", was defined as the most far-reaching declaration ever made by an Israeli official toward the Palestinians. Not only Barak acknowledged the existence of the political entity entitled Palestinians, He also recognized their suffering, but without taking any responsibility for its occurrence.
- 15 And then came the 2nd Intifada and the issue of apology went up in the flames...

How do journalists manage the discourse of and about apology?

- 16 Before tackling my second my question we should notice that there are several reasons for journalists to engage in the discourse of apology (see Kampf, 2011): First, apologies may serve as a means of legitimizing journalistic work, as they allow them to perform their public role as norm enforcers. They can point out on a deviation from what is publicly perceived as appropriate, and later demand accountability from the public transgressor. The second reason may be their temporary superiority over political actors throughout the conflictual process which result in apologies. Whereas during the routine coverage of events journalists are dependent upon the political establishment as their main sources, in the case of political transgressions journalists who point out anti-normative actions of the powerful, have the upper hand. Third, the coverage of apologies is in line with the journalists' wish to signal their belonging to a specific society by contributing to the creation of a social consensus. Last, rituals of apology are appealing for journalists as tellers of melodramatic stories that draw wide public interest. They position well-known public figures and institutions in the limelight in the roles of transgressors and victims and include complex sets of emotions, such as sorrow, embarrassment, shame, humiliation, and resentment, all enacted and "celebrated" by the direct participants and the public.
- 17 The basic function of journalists in the context of the Israeli Palestinian conflict is the mediation of apologetic gestures to the public. The media also serve as a platform for public debate of the necessity and the sincerity of apologetic expressions. Returning to Barak's expression of sorrow, while in Israel, his statement stirred a public debate; in the Palestinian and Arabic press it received almost no response. A search in five newspapers – Israeli-Palestinian *El-Itihad*, Palestinian *El-Ayam* and *El-Kuds*, and Arabic *El-Shark Elawsat* and *El-Hayat* – two days following Barak's speech, yielded only two minor references to Israel's recognition of the Palestinian suffering. The items were published in the news

sections of *El-Itihad* and *El-Kuds*, included an informative account of Barak's expression of sorrow (Kampf, 2012).

- 18 On the Israeli side, journalists were involved in the public debate in the opinion columns, erupted before Barak's statement and immediately following it. Analysis of the debate shows that it took the form of negotiation over four issues, which paralleled the four felicity conditions of apology. The debate was focused, among other things, on the factual nature of the conflict: Was there a transgression? Who is responsible for it? Who is the victim? On the formulation of words and of its sincerity: Was it a genuine and meaningfully expression?
- 19 More interesting is what goes beyond the mere reporting of the actions and speech acts made by others. Journalists may take an active role in rituals of apology: They may frame actions as transgressions and may contribute to the intensity of a conflict by taking on the role of commentators, mediators and even of instigators (Kampf, 2011).
- 20 The following example demonstrates journalistic active involvement in rituals of apology as instigators. The events began in April 2001 with an exchange of fire between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian security officials at the Erez border crossing following a meeting between senior political officials from both sides. In response to the international denunciations against Israel, Israeli PM Ariel Sharon sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in which he expressed "sorrow for the regrettable incident" in the name of the Israeli government (*Haaretz*, 10.4.01). This expression of sorrow was reported as an apology in the newspaper *Maariv*: "The Prime Minister sent a letter to Secretary of State Colin Powell and apologized for the shooting by IDF soldiers"
- 21 The act of changing the pragmatic function of the speech act from non-responsible sorrow to apology was only the first journalistic practice in initiating a mini scandal. The report also included reactions in the public arena to the alleged statement of responsibility made by Sharon. Indeed, the practice exercised by *Maariv* of taking responses from other figures in the public discourse generated a second wave of accusations, this time by Israeli army officers and right-wing politicians, describing the apology letter as a "slap in the face and expression of distrust that weakens the strength of IDF"(Yitzchak Levy *Maariv*, 10.4.01).
- 22 The *Maariv* report on the apology and the subsequent accusations did not end here. The newspaper played the role of an instigator in the evolving plot and went on to elicit a reaction from the transgressor (Sharon). In a later report on the political crisis, *Maariv* (10.4.01) published a statement of denial made by the prime minister's spokesman, in which he explained the multi-function of the verb *sorry* that was the source of the misunderstanding:
- The prime minister did not apologize and does not intend to apologize. He is simply expressing his sorrow that the incident occurred... The letter was written in a highly sophisticated manner. If read carefully, it is clear that, in fact, the PM blames the Palestinians and is not apologizing for any Israeli act.
- 23 The spokesman denied the implication that the PM had apologized for the incident. While Sharon's statement was intended to suffice as an apology in the eyes of the U.S., he intended it to be perceived by Israelis as a general expression of sorrow, or even as a shifting of blame to the Palestinians. This tactic would have worked had *Maariv* kept the original pragmatic function in its report.

- 24 This case is not exceptional. Analyzing reports on apologies in popular and elite newspapers reveals that the practice of switching between the responsible *apology* and non-responsible *sorry* is common. There might be at least two reasons for doing so. The naïve explanation faults journalists' and editors' lack of awareness regarding the differences between these verbs. The cynical explanation is that the substitution of *apology* with *sorry* is done in order to arouse emotional oppositions regarding transgressions and as a means for personalizing political confrontations (as between Levy and Sharon in the described case). In either case, the initiation of apology discourse poses an ethical challenge to journalistic practices. It shifts the public's attention from the first-order transgression – putting the life of Palestinian officials under threat – into a peripheral second-order transgression, posing a threat to the organizational image of IDF by apologizing for its acts.
- 25 In lieu of conclusion, a comment on the normative role of journalists in mediating remedial acts in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Journalists today do not merely report on “stories” but rather may become the writers and directors of developing moral narratives. Instead of mediating the “world out there,” they create news stories such as those around apologies, impacting the ways in which the public engages in the moral dilemmas underlying these stories. These practices can be understood against the backdrop of two alternative explanations: (1) the commercialization of news: apologies are means for creating political drama that sells. (2) Responsible journalism (some will call it “peace journalism”), in which journalists may pursue a meaningful intervention for restoring relations or promoting reconciliation. In this context, the greatest challenge is to differentiate between different types of infelicitous speech acts in an age of apology; hollow, humiliating or insincere remedial acts, once expressed in public, may nevertheless have meaningful value.

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NOTES

1. Note that we should not underestimate expressions of sorrow as they still signal a reaffirmation of the norms of fighting at war. Compare it for instance to the Hamas joyful responses, which means “killing civilians is justified”.

ABSTRACTS

Against the backdrop of the claim made in recent years by scholars, writers, and journalists, according to which apologies has become a central rhetorical genre in local and global politics, this paper asks (1) how the political fad of beating one’s breast is relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, (2) how do journalists generate and manage the discourse of and about apologies. In conclusion, I reflect on the normative role of journalists in mediating corrective, symbolic actions in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Ces dernières années, chercheurs, écrivains, journalistes ont affirmé que l'excuse est devenue un genre rhétorique central dans la politique locale et globale. Sur cet arrière-plan, ma présentation pose deux questions. (1) En quoi ceci est-il pertinent dans le conflit israélo-palestinien. (2) Comment les journalistes produisent et gèrent le discours de l'excuse, et à propos de l'excuse. En conclusion, je propose une réflexion sur le rôle normatif des journalistes comme relais d'actions symboliques, qui se veulent réparatrices, dans le conflit israélo-palestinien.

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Keywords: Apology, remedial actions, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, targeted killing

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Zohar Kampf is an Associate Professor of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His main research interest lies in the linkage among language, media and politics. He has published articles in the areas of discourse analysis, political communication, and journalism.