

THE POWER OF GHOSTS

The Middle East Peace process stands at an important crossroads just now. Until the recent demise of Yasser Arafat, the process seemed locked into a no-win situation, caused in no small part by the ghosts of the past, which hovered around the two main protagonists, Sharon and Arafat, whispering in their ears. We are all more or less in thrall to these ghosts, partly because we constantly feed them by the power of recollection combined with our over-active imaginations. Ghosts come in two main flavours – self-images and other-images.

How can we become haunted by our self? By being willing to continually reinforce a self-image that is built from reactions to events long ago. We say to ourselves, "Two years ago I faced this kind of situation which I solved by reacting in this way. Why not do the same again?" The answer is that no two situations are ever exactly alike - the complex and subtle web of causes and effects, or karma, ensures that relationships in consciousness are constantly evolving, and to pretend otherwise is to condemn oneself to behaving like a piece of clockwork, or an aimlessly ricocheting billiard ball. Behaving like that leaves us stuck in the past, and turns us into an obstructing force. Our understanding of who we are becomes rigid and crystallised - "I am a strong person who gives in to no-one", "I never reveal my intentions, in case others take advantage", "I desire x so strongly that I can never be happy until I have it," etc., etc. The oftener we repeat these affirmations of "who we are", the more difficult it becomes to break free of them. They take on a life of their own, and hover at the threshold of consciousness, ever ready to sweep in and sabotage our efforts to move on into the future.

The same process also takes place with others. We meet a person for the first time, and an impression is formed, even though we have almost no real information about the complex synthesis that this person is. We meet them again, and we are probably expecting their behaviour to be similar to last time, so our expectations shape our perceptions of the second meeting, and anything that would contradict our first impression may be tuned out. If at some future point they do behave quite differently, we may feel so challenged by the change that we either ignore it, or regard it as a freak aberration. Slowly but surely, a phantom of the other is built up that may bear scant resemblance to the underlying reality. And when we are about to meet them again, it is this ghost that comes rushing into our minds, obscuring our vision of the real person and skewing our responses.

The above may seem a rather melodramatic way of describing human relationships, and in fact, for the most part, we usually find ways of resisting the impact of these phantoms. But it becomes more difficult as the situations in which we're involved become more charged with emotion. And when something as huge as the destinies of two peoples is on the table, it is understandable that feelings can run so high that the ghosts can take charge and dictate events.

In the case of Sharon and Arafat, due to a long history of mutual conflict, each had powerful images of the other which blocked their ability to communicate in a civilised way. And as leaders, both also deliberately cultivated self-images that were strongly linked with the identity of their respective peoples. Now that Yasser Arafat has passed away, Ariel Sharon finds himself faced with a leader in Mahmoud Abbas who is not concealed beneath such dense layers of ghostly haze. And it also appears as if Sharon himself is trying to shake off some of his own ghosts, as he loosens some of his links with the settler movement. So the opportunity is there to free the conflict from the cold dead hand of the past and move forward. Let us hope that both sides can use the light of the mind and the warmth of the heart to drive off the last shreds of spectral fog and step into a brighter future for both peoples.