

Understanding Arab Culture

Lazar Berman

“But why should honor outlive honesty?” Shakespeare, Othello.

“Truly your blood, your property, and your honor are inviolable.” Muhammad, Saheeh Al Bukhari, # 1739.

The North was burning. It was the summer of 2006, and I was a young lieutenant in the newest company of recruits in the Bedouin Scout Battalion 585. Our soldiers had been inducted four months earlier, and the company staff was involved in a two-day workshop on the coast of Netanya after successfully guiding the soldiers through basic training. The workshop was run by two women, organizational consultants brought in from the civilian sector. I sat astounded. The other commanders were deliberately misrepresenting the situation in the company. I struggled to understand why they were unwilling to face our problems and improve themselves and their soldiers. The answer became clear to me as the workshop progressed, and has served me as a paradigm for understanding Arab culture.

The 585 is the only unit of its kind in Western militaries. Its soldiers come almost exclusively from Israel's Arab communities. The majority of soldiers and almost all of the officers' corps come from Israel's sizeable Bedouin minority. There is a large number of Muslim Arabs who are not Bedouin, called Felahim, as well several Christian Arabs. The only non-Arabs are the occasional Circassian, and Jewish officers transferred in to fill command positions when the battalion lacks the manpower to do so.

I was the only Jew in my company. Upon completing the eight month Officers School in February 2006, I requested a position in the 585. I had done my basic training on the same base as their recruits, and had several Bedouin friends from various courses we had completed together. I admired the battalion's singular mission and its soldiers' bravery, and I saw an opportunity to discover a new facet of Israeli society while instructing young Arab Israelis who had volunteered for service. Naïve, maybe, but to me this was real Zionism.

I consider myself a believing Westerner- that is, I believe in most Western ideals and modes of thought. I was educated with these values, and I brought them with me to the army and to the workshop. For me, this was a rare chance to air my platoon's shortcomings and receive the views of my peers in the company staff. In my mind, an honest and sometimes emotional confrontation of our miscalculations as commanders was about to unfold, resulting in a refreshing gust in our sails as we readied ourselves to take our soldiers through three grueling summer months of advanced training- unless our efforts were needed on one of the Second Lebanon War's two

fronts. This is what the workshop intended. As we came across issues where we as commanders had erred, I eagerly offered a harsh criticism of my own conduct, and diplomatically but firmly commented on that of others. I was the only one doing so. The other commanders, almost all Bedouin save a Muslim and Christian Arab, painted a rosier picture. They took every pain to convince the consultants that there was not a single problem in the company. Their typical response was a smile, and an assertion that things were going smoothly.

They could not have been farther from the truth. We were presiding over a company that had begun a dangerous spiral downward after a strong start to basic training. Our soldiers fought each other, stole from the battalion canteen, and went AWOL at a much higher rate than soldiers in regular IDF infantry companies. Some of those problems undoubtedly were the inevitable result of the battalion's noble efforts to attract at-risk Bedouin and Arabs to the army in order to integrate them into Israeli society. But the majority of these norms stemmed from laziness and lack of personal example on the part of the commanders, from the squad commanders all the way to the Company CO. The staff made no effort to confront honestly any of these problems. Their goal was to make a good impression on these two civilians for the two days, without even giving a minute's thought to the potential benefits of confronting ourselves as fallible commanders. In my mind, these two consultants were never going to see us again, so there was no reason why I should care what they thought of me as a commander. And I was willing to put aside their lack of qualification to critique combat officers. I saw a time for valuable reflection and emotional baring, crucial to our success and to that of our infantrymen. For me, the desired result was an improved staff; for the others, the aim was to present a picture as positive as possible.

The consultants were ignorant of the dynamic in the group. As a result, their conclusion was that my platoon was the weaker of the two, and that I was overly critical of a company that was progressing smoothly. By the end, it became clear to me what larger cultural difference was driving commanders in the IDF to promote themselves at the direct expense of their subordinates.

What had the consultants failed to comprehend? Nothing less than the dominant feature of Arab society and politics- the honor/shame culture. It is not an issue that the consultants were willing to explore and unlikely they even considered, but dealing with it honestly provides a clear and tangible case study for the larger cultural context that is responsible for the state of the Middle East today.

In this culture, at its most basic, a man must strive to maintain his honor at all costs. He must fight, even lie or kill, to protect his honor and that of his family. Conversely, when a man fails to protect his honor, he is shamed. He may regain his honor by vengeance against those who shamed him, often through bloodshed.

It is counterintuitive that the feared and despised 'humiliator' of the Arab world, the Israel Defense Force, would contain a useful case-study for that society's dominant cultural factor. I bring this to light not to belittle a fine combat battalion whose soldiers have performed bravely in one of the most dangerous theaters in the world. After the outbreak of the second intifada, the Bedouin Scouts lived in their APCs for weeks at a time on the sandy, hundred-yard-wide road between the Egyptian and Palestinian Rafiah as they defended the Philadelphi Route. They have

suffered heavy losses during the fighting since 2000, including the destruction of their outpost JVT by explosives packed into a tunnel. They managed to kill two of the attackers involved in the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit, in the event that initiated that summer's hostilities. The battalion commander and most of the company commanders are rising stars in the army, and their drive to find and obliterate the enemy has led them to celebrated battlefield successes. The unit serves a crucial social role as well, absorbing into its ranks troubled young Bedouin who would turn to a life of smuggling and petty crime without the structure, Israeli identity, and education they receive from the army. The fact that the honor/shame model applies to the battalion underscores its pervasiveness in Arab societies, even those who ally with Zionism.

Further, the honor/shame model is not exclusively a negative social factor. The Arabs in the Battalion are largely driven by a desire to reap the personal and familial honor that successful military service brings. Military culture, including that of the West, is largely based on its own honor/shame dynamic. The Marine Corps' motto, "Death before Dishonor", is a resounding statement of military honor/shame mentality. Pursuit of honor drives individuals to work for ideas larger than themselves, often at the expense of personal material gain. It can bind families and nations together around zealously guarded identities. The danger arises when the honor/shame model is misunderstood or ignored- as much a problem in the West today as it was on that summer afternoon in Netanya.

The Workshop as a Paradigm

My experience at the workshop was a result of the misunderstanding of societal differences between the West and the Arab world, and as such it serves as a poignant paradigm of the dysfunctional intersection of these two value systems in today's world.

I, as a product of Western education, was willing- no, eager- to air my shortcomings with the faith that in dealing with them in an open setting I would emerge a better officer. The more open I was, the more willing to confront and blame myself, the more effective the workshop would be. The ultimate virtue was self-criticism- the rawer, the better.

The same value system holds for the West. One who criticizes oneself, or better yet, his country, is beyond moral reproach. Israelis, especially through their media, are consummate self-criticizers. Israel's ability to look herself in the eye unflinchingly and point to her own weaknesses is certainly one of her great strengths. The turnaround in the military leadership after the Second Lebanon War, from Chief of Staff Dan Halutz to Division Commanders such as Brigadier-General Gal Hirsch, was stunningly quick and comprehensive. Israelis sometimes take their self-criticisms to extremes, willing to risk damaging morale in the time of war in the belief that this is ultimate form of patriotism. Groups like B'tselem and Machsom Watch provide endless ammunition to anti-Zionists with their need to uncover moral failings in the troops watching over them. These negative results are trumped by the feeling of moral elevation their self-criticism provides.

The Bedouin commanders operated under an entirely different set of values. To openly admit shortcomings in front of two strangers- two women!- was unthinkable. It did not matter that by refusing to deal with serious issues in the company they were failing as commanders. The

potential benefit that their soldiers would reap from an honest discussion was never a factor. Their overriding concern was the defense of their honor. The only problems they were willing to point out were ones in my platoon, issues I had previously voiced.

So it is in the Arab world. Arab society, as expressed through media, authors, and government, is largely unwilling to engage in introspective criticism. Even Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged this reality. In his praise for Israel's Winograd Commission Interim report in the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, Nasrallah stated that, "I find it hard to believe that such a committee would be established in any Arab country."¹ Rather than deal with growing fanaticism or appalling literacy rates, Arab voices blame the West, specifically America and Israel. Better to leave Palestinians in wretched camps for sixty years, reason Arab leaders, than to be shamed into accepting the existence of a Jewish state by absorbing them into Arab countries. With the Bedouin commanders as with the Arab world, the defense of one's honor is vastly more important than honesty or self-improvement. Francois de la Rochefoucauld's maxim, "Great men's honor ought always to be measured by the methods made use of in obtaining it", applies only to Western society. If, in the Arab world, sooner the honor of the elite than the dignity of the people, then, in my company, sooner the honor of the commanders than the quality of the soldiers.

The two consultants grossly misunderstood the company, and therefore came to the erroneous conclusion that while the company was strong and well-managed, it was my platoon that contained all of the problems. There are three possible explanations for this conclusion. First, they did not understand the honor/shame society and its effect on the Bedouins' conduct in the workshop. Second, any echoes of discord that they may have perceived were quickly discarded by the attitude of "They are different. Who am I, a Westerner, to criticize their expression of cultural norms?" Finally, it is possible that one of the consultants did indeed understand that in defense of their honor the Bedouin commanders were being dishonest, and she even deemed herself worthy of indicating this to them. She was stopped in the end by the fear of their reaction if she spoke about it publicly and thereby shamed them. Better to preside over a flawed workshop than to deal with the professional consequences of offending the entire Bedouin company.

The Western media and a large portion of the public significantly misread the Middle East for the same reasons. The majority of Western opinion-makers are so culturally egocentric that they are unable to comprehend that people around the world do not operate according to the same sets of rules, that every people does not think the same. And our logic seems to run along the following lines: If "we" are reasonable people who believe in the goodness of all people and wish to work out conflict through verbal resolution, how can we not assume that the enemy is the same?

Another group feels that it has no right to criticize another people, especially a 'non-white' one. It feels that this would be arrogant and would invoke progressive culture's great taboo, colonialism. What could be a more deplorable example of Western imperialism than to assume that "we" are morally superior to "them"? And yet, when the media assume this attitude, as did

¹JPost.Com Staff, "Nasrallah Praises Winograd Committee," *Jerusalem Post Online*, May 12, 2007.

my company's evaluators, they come to mistaken conclusions about the nature of "reality", and in so reporting back, they are simply failing in their mission of accurate investigation and impartial evaluation of the evidence.

And there is a small but growing number of people, especially in Europe, who understand the Honor/Shame society and its consequences when it comes into contact with the West, but are too intimidated to speak about it. They are fearful either of direct, often violent, retribution from those they have dishonored or ostracism by fellow 'progressive' westerners. The Western media is rendered as incapable of understanding the Middle East as those two women at the workshop.

Shame vs. Guilt

I was willing to have my leadership publicly criticized because I would have felt guilt at refraining from a process that would lead me to become a better officer. Guilt is a personal matter; it involves primarily answering one's conscience. It stems from knowing that one failed to fulfill one's personal obligations to live and act a certain way. To not address issues in my platoon because of my own pride would have been a violation of the principles to which I am bound.

The Bedouin commanders were concerned with avoiding shame. Honor and shame are always in the eyes of others. Concern with shame does not precipitate guilt's private reckoning. The workshop's focus on public analysis and criticism guaranteed its failure for our unit. The West seeks to avoid guilt, the Arab world shame. Whereas shame requires a witness; guilt is a private emotion. Being whole with one's actions is paramount to public honor. The elevation of conscience over honor is elucidated by Michel de Montaigne: "Any person of honor chooses rather to lose his honor than to lose his conscience." Western honor is contingent upon following one's conscience, and not on eluding shame.

The Strongman Model

In order to truly grasp Arab honor/shame society, one must explore the often overlooked 'Strongman Model'. In Arab society, the man who is given the most honor, expressed in obedience and deference, is the strongman. He can be a family patriarch, a religious leader, or a well-connected businessman. Less influential men strive to show publicly their submission to this strongman, and try to get as close to him as possible. They want to be 'close to the plate', as the Hebrew expression goes. Men in Arab society seek out the strongman, and as long as he is seen as the dominant figure, he is accorded the respect and obedience of those around him. As soon as he is shamed, or replaced by someone regarded as more powerful, the deposed strongman will quickly lose his circle, and his honor.

We have seen this phenomenon in the Middle East numerous times. When Israel rolled into the West Bank in 1967, Arab children ran alongside the tanks yelling, "Shalom, Shalom!". Israel was the new boss in town. In the years after the conquest of the West Bank from Jordan and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, common Palestinians saw Israel as the new strongman. Their leaders made efforts to cooperate with the Israelis and to get close to the Israeli plate. When Israel has shown weakness, they are no longer seen as the strongman. When Ehud Barak pulled out of

Lebanon in May 2000, Arabs saw Israel as vulnerable. Arafat unleashed his violent campaign a few months later. In the Middle East, weakness is suicide.

In the aftermath of the Arab countries' embarrassing defeat in the 1948 war, humiliated Arab leaders, once strongmen, experienced the fatal fall from honor. As Michael Oren writes in "Six Days of War":

Husni Za'im was barely six months in power before being overthrown and executed...Next was 'Abdallah, felled by a Palestinian bullet outside Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque in July, 1951, while his grandson and later successor, Hussein, looked on. Iraq's Hashemite king, Faisal, would be dismembered by a savage Baghdad mob in 1958...Egypt's turn came in July 1952 with Faruq's ouster by a clique of self-styled Free Officers under General Muhammad Naguib. Within a year, Naguib himself was deposed by the true strongman behind the regime, the inspired and purportedly more moderate colonel, Gamal Abdel Nasser.²

American forces, through display of force and unwavering commitment, utilized the strongman model. They replaced the Taliban and dislodged Osama bin Laden, who very quickly went from revered icons of Islamic resistance and pride to shamed agitators causing more trouble than good. Daniel Pipes writes of bin Laden's unparalleled stature across the Muslim world in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. In the streets of the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, thousands of protesters marched, singing his praises. In September and October of 2001, it was almost impossible to find a Muslim politician who was willing to condemn bin Laden. As of October 15, 2001, "the only Islamic scholar in Egypt who unreservedly condemned the September 11th suicide operations admitted that he is completely isolated."³

The situation changed rapidly a month into the Allied campaign against the Taliban. Muslims saw the unequivocal power of American military might, and turned away from bin Laden and the Taliban. On October 8th, the Ayub Stadium in Pakistan held 10,000 demonstrators who shouted with joy as Islamic clerics called for Jihad against the West. One month later, with the American campaign against the Taliban at its height, barely 500 people attended the Friday rally. Bin Laden's honor waned with each mile of rocky desert the Allies took from the Taliban. Arab media began attacking bin Laden not on strategic terms, but on the same religious standards by which they had found him so heroic only weeks before. There were even commentators who suggested that bin Laden was part of a Jewish plot to smear Islam. "If world Zionism had spent billions of dollars to tarnish the image of Islam, it will not accomplish what the terrorists have done with their actions and words," writes Nabil Luka Bibawi in *Al-Ahram*.⁴ Bin Laden went from extolled to mocked as the Muslim world perceived him as weak; the United States moved in the opposite direction, her military power casting off the image of feeble victim that she had built up over the previous two decades and allowing her to become the regional strongman. The images of Iraqi men beating statues of Saddam Hussein with their shoes in the spring of 2003 remain vivid in the memory of Americans. Those men understood that the old strongman, Hussein, had been deposed and that the United States Army had replaced him in Iraq. Iraqis

² Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.

³ Daniel Pipes, "A New Round of Anger and Humiliation: Islam after 9/11," in *The Compendium: A Critical Analysis of the Arab-Israeli Conflict July 2000-July 2002*, ed. George D. Hanus (Chicago: Gravitas Media, 2002), 91.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

strived to outdo each other in publicly displaying their disdain for the fallen ruler. The troubles that the Allies have encountered in their efforts to bring tribal strongmen to their side stem from uncertainty among the Iraqis whether the insurgents or the Americans are truly in charge. There is a ritualistic aspect to the display of deference to a strongman. I experienced the same model in my time in the 585. Initially, I was struck by the Bedouin soldiers' discipline and deference to me. I was used to the attitude of the average Israeli recruit, who acts as if he is doing his commander a favor if he stands at attention. My Bedouin soldiers would stumble over each other in their attempts to carry out my commands. Though such contact is prohibited during basic training, on several occasions recruits tried to bring me a pitcher of cold drinking water in the mess hall while I ate my lunch.

The soldiers' parents especially treated me like a strongman. On my periodic visits to soldiers' homes, I was accorded respect beyond the famous standards of Arab hospitality. The entire extended family would be seated in front of me, as the soldier's father and uncles took the choice spots by my side. They would relentlessly bring me food and drink, and would spend the first hour singing their son's praises. After having done their duty in honoring me, they would move on to the request. Almost always they wanted to know if I would send their son to become an officer, a development that would bring great honor to the family. Male relatives became a useful tool in keeping problematic soldiers in line. A phone call to a father would result in twenty minutes of contrite apology for his son's behavior, followed by a promise that he would solve the problem. Inevitably, the son would return to the base from a weekend leave quiet and ashamed of his past miscues.

The strongman model contains an inbuilt recipe for inter-familial or inter-racial violence. There is only room for a limited number of people close to the plate. If one clan or sect manages to secure a place near the strongman, then another group is shut out. This leads to Arabs fighting each other for their piece of a zero-sum pie. My company was far from homogenous. The main split was between Bedouin and 'Felahim', or Arabs from the cities. Their rivalry goes back well into Ottoman times. The Bedouin themselves split into northern and southern clans. The northern Bedouin tend to be more educated and live in modern villages. Those in the south who have not moved to new Bedouin cities still live a semi-nomadic existence, complete with multiple wives and marriage between first cousins. The company's other platoon commander, a Bedouin from the north, was an extremely reasonable and sweet individual in addition to being a ruthlessly effective commander. I had never heard any expression of prejudice come from his mouth. However, faced with the possibility of a member of a different ethnic group taking a position of honor, he revealed a very different side. One of his squad commanders, a Felah, was rejected from Officers School. The Bedouin officer smiled and announced to the rest of the staff, "Fine. So we won't have any Felah officers. All the better."

Crossing the Honor/Shame Boundary

I was aware of the importance of honor in Arab society, and took care not to offend any recruits or fellow commanders. The famously crude army lingo to which I grew accustomed in the regular infantry units, usually revolving around fabricated trysts by soldiers' mothers, was absolutely unacceptable in the 585. At the end of the second month of basic training, I had some time to train only the leading soldiers in the company. I had worked them hard all week. I

thought that they deserved an hour to relax in a classroom and ask me questions about the army. Many of them have cousins who serve as I.D.F. trackers, and they wanted to hear about my experience with trackers in the Gaza Strip. I gave several scenarios in which a tracker would be utilized, and told the soldiers that in some situations the army chooses to track with a Belgian Shepherd from Oketz, the canine unit. I said absolutely nothing controversial or offensive. The session continued without incident. I went into that night's staff meeting with my mind on the next day's training. To my surprise, the CO demanded to know what was said in my discussion with the soldiers. I was not sure what he was aiming for, so I recounted some of the questions the soldiers had asked.

"I hear you compared trackers to dogs," he said. "Some soldiers were very offended." I gave him the true account of what was said, along with some words about his tendency to listen to soldiers at the expense of his officers, and the issue was forgotten, at least publicly. The soldiers who complained knowingly exaggerated, taking a harmless, factual comment and turning it into an attack on their honor.

There are two lessons from the incident. The first is that unintentionally and unaware, one may offend someone from an honor/shame society simply by using the wrong 'keyword'. Dogs are considered especially dirty in the Arab world, and it is one of the ultimate insults to be called one. A comment that may seem trivial to Westerners can incite Arab, and many Muslim societies to extreme violence. The film version of Khaled Hosseini's novel, "The Kite Runner", has a scene in which the lead character, an 11 year-old boy, is raped. Ahmad Jaan Mahmiidzada, father of the Afghan boy who portrays the victim, fears for his life because of the scene. "My own people from my own tribe will turn against me because of the story. They may cut my throat, they may kill me, they may torture me. Anything could happen to me."⁵ Rape brings such powerful shame that a tribe will torture a member for allowing his son to be filmed as a rape victim. Even among some Bedouin tribes in the Negev desert in southern Israel, the honor killing of a daughter or sister is an acceptable, even imperative, means of restoring familial honor. The second lesson is that dishonest Arab spokesmen may use the honor card as an excuse, as did my soldiers. They saw a chance to win some leeway by inventing an attack on their honor. Those who are aware of Arab honor/shame society but do not think critically are susceptible to falling into this trap.

To Lead by Example

The most important quality in an Israeli officer is personal example. Exemplified by the phrase "Aharai! (After me!)", the I.D.F. officer is expected to lead his soldiers into battle, and to be the best soldier in the unit. This value is drilled into cadets in Commanders and Officers Courses, and lack of personal example is ample reason for removal from command.

In the first month of basic training in the 585, the company went on a short, 8 kilometer march. This was part of a series of marches that increase in length and difficulty until the 60 kilometer march at the end of basic training. In keeping with "Aharai", all commanders are expected to complete the march with their soldiers. Since it was a short march, each squad marched

⁵ Lawrence Van Gelder, "Father Fears Kite Runner", *New York Times*, September 21, 2007, Arts Section.

separately, led by the squad commander. The officers were to accompany their platoons from afar, keeping an eye on the soldiers and squad commanders. We had introduced the soldiers to tear gas that same week, so the march was to be done with gas masks in pouches on their hips. The march began with nightfall, and I walked along with my platoon. I stayed in the shadows so that they would not see me. To my horror, one of my squad commanders removed his gas mask kit and tossed it into the desert. I retrieved the equipment and confronted him after the march. Forget the disrespect for military equipment, I said to him. How does an I.D.F. commander allow himself to commit such an act in front of his soldiers? I had never seen such disregard for the army's values in my entire service. He protested, arguing that he had done this march already as a soldier, and therefore did not need to do it again in full gear. The soldiers would understand, he said, and did not expect him to do everything that they did. This transgression was more than I was willing to accept. I lobbied the CO to have the squad commander removed and sent back to Gaza as a private. The CO refused, and did not see the issue as seriously as I did. I should not have been surprised that he did not value personal example, as the CO rose hours after his troops did every morning.

It was an excuse I heard often from the Bedouin staff- "I've done mine". They saw no value in leading by example, and thought that a commander should revel in his position and in his privileges. To them, being a commander does not come with extra responsibility, it comes only with extra honor.

When do we understand?

There are instances in which the West understands the honor/shame culture, and is able to utilize it effectively. When the dynamics of Arab culture are grasped, it is by those in the West who have the most contact with the Arab world. Unfortunately, in today's world, that is the military. Western militaries heavily involved in fighting Arab armies or militant groups and in swaying the opinion of Arab population, mainly the United States military and the I.D.F., use their knowledge of Arab society to shame their enemies in the eyes of the Arab public. In March 2006, Israeli forces raided Jericho prison to arrest Ahmed Saadat and four other members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. They were responsible for the 2001 murder of Israeli minister Rehavam Ze'evi. The I.D.F. paraded the Palestinian prisoners in their underwear before the international media, humiliating them in front of their people. It is possible that the United States used the same tactic with Saddam Hussein, photographing him clad only in his underwear in pictures that the military says were illegally leaked to a British tabloid. Hassan Nasrallah plays the part of the quintessential strongman- proud, brazen, militarily capable. Israel tried to shame him in the eyes of the Lebanese during the 2006 war in Lebanon. Israeli electronic warfare specialists were able to interrupt Nasrallah's broadcasts on al-Manar with footage of dead Hezbollah fighters, taunting Nasrallah. The I.A.F. dropped leaflets over Lebanese villages on July 18 reading: "Hassan, what are you afraid of? You are afraid of appearing in public and you broadcast recorded speeches. You fled to your shelter and left your men frightened and exposed in the face of Israel's power...How long must the people of Lebanon pay for your cowardice?"⁶

⁶, SGM. Herbert A. Freidman (Ret.), "Israeli Propaganda Raids on Lebanon". <http://www.psywarrior.com/IsraeliLebanon.html>

Occasionally, leaders in the Arab world will also understand and utilize the West's cultural model. As discussed earlier, in an interview on May 12, 2007, Nasrallah praised Israel for its ability to discuss publicly its mistakes in the war and to remedy the problems immediately. He even spoke of Hezbollah's own commission, though its proceedings were kept secret. Unfortunately, the mutual insight into Arab and Western cultures cited here is reached by attempts to vanquish, not to understand. There is no shortage of constructive fora for the two cultures to study what drives the other. Today, the West and the Arab world come into contact in every field. The West, especially its media, must give up its cultural arrogance and preconceptions and view the Arab world as it is. Misunderstanding Arab honor/shame society has negative, potentially disastrous consequences. He who fails to comprehend this paradigm will insult an Arab friend and will be deceived by an Arab enemy. Insisting on universal cultural similarity will not lead to cultural understanding. We respect societal differences by acknowledging them, not by imagining them away. Only by honoring what makes us different can we approach each other as equals.

Lazar Berman is a former Israeli Defense Force lieutenant who served with Bedouin Scout Battalion 585.

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