Reconciliation / Ruth Gavison

It is hard to do justice to such a complex subject in a short talk. I will divide my thoughts to consider three questions: What is reconciliation? Is it desirable? And how can we achieve it?

1. We can see from the two previous presentations that reconciliation is a very, very complicated idea. It is connected in many ways to many other ideas, but it is distinct. Reconciliation is a state of mind. It can be a state of mind that is attributed to a collective and is of political significance, but it can also be a state of mind of an individual. To be reconciled with something is different from being converted or persuaded into a belief. To be reconciled with something is to come to terms, to be at peace with something. Often, reconciliation involves an effort to accept something that you are reluctant to, something that you make yourself accept despite the fact that it is objectionable to you. It's interesting to think about reconciliation in this way because it highlights the fact that in order to be reconciled to something you usually need to work on it. It is not something that comes to you naturally. Therefore I am not sure that Prof. David Heyd is right when he says that we psychologically tend towards reconciliation. Very often we encounter situations, in both individual lives and in collective experiences, where there is an inability to give up on a feeling of being wronged. Often, individuals and groups devote
their lives to not letting a person or group who had wronged them, "get away with it". Very often, being preoccupied with the idea of "not letting the other get away with it" seriously interferes with your own life as an individual or as a collective. It is not productive or constructive, but it happens nonetheless. So reconciliation is not necessarily something that comes naturally to us or something that is among our psychological inclinations.

The reason we may find reconciliation so hard, is that the need to be reconciled is the evidence of a great anger. Reconciliation requires that we find a way to overcome the anger sufficiently so that it does not control us. This is especially hard to do in the kind of very dramatic and rare situation that David Heyd described - the clear and pure case of victimization by the Nazis. The paradigmatic case of victimization is one in which the victim does nothing to trigger the injury done to him/herself. The victim is completely helpless. The omnipotent victimizer uses his power to the utmost -- to torture, to humiliate and to kill. In such cases, it may be extremely difficult psychologically to 'get over' the anger and move on, even if one knows that this is necessary for one's own survival.

Being reconciled with the past requires either repressing it or facing it but nevertheless, coming to terms with it. So punishment may be neither necessary nor sufficient for reconciliation. The same holds for recognizing the truth. We say "truth and reconciliation", This suggests that recognition of a past wrong is required for reconciliation. There is some force to that position. Past wrongs cannot be undone, but often it is easier to move on and open a new page if the wrongdoer explicitly recognized the wrong. On the other hand, explicit and public recognition of the past wrong,
especially if it is of major magnitude, may make it appear as if forgiving and even just moving on and "opening a new page" is totally unacceptable. This complex relationship between reconciliation and truth holds both for reconciliation as an internal mental process, and reconciliation as a process between individuals or groups.

The ability to reconcile is in part a question of individual make-up. Two general observations can be made, however. First, it is almost impossible to reconcile if a person (or group) does not have a strong future-regarding attitude. The incentive for reconciliation is that it promises us a better future. If we are not interested in the future, or if we let the past rule us we are unlikely to reconcile ourselves. Secondly, reconciliation requires that there is no present or future perceived threat. Ideally, when another person (or group) is involved, reconciliation requires trust, but it can also be achieved without trust if one has a sense of security. In the lives of individuals, reconciliation often comes with the feeling that you can give up the anger because the anger already served its purpose, and you do not need it any longer because the need for it is a matter of the past. When one is not threatened or does not feel threatened, the kind of responses that were developed in order to affirm one's identity vis-a-vis some humiliation or negation are no longer necessary because the threat does not exist anymore.

2. Once we say that about the nature of reconciliation, the second question opens up: Is reconciliation desirable? Here, I am not asking whether it is prudent or whether it is the natural way to go. I think the answers to these questions are complicated. I want to look at the morality of reconciliation, and I think that we heard from Prof. Heyd, via Jean Amery, a very resounding no: reconciliation in some situations may seem necessary but
is not justified. Like Professor Heyd, I find this text extremely powerful and moving, but I basically and deeply disagree with the sentiments on both psychological tendencies and morality expressed there. It is not a matter of forgiveness. I agree that victimizers do not deserve the victim's forgiveness. But I don't think that reconciliation is legitimating or forgiving. I think these are distinct. Reconciliation is your decision about your life, not your decision about how your 'going on' with your life affects the life of the wrongdoer.

Amery's case is clear and powerful. Even in such cases, reconciliation is permissible, as is continuing resentment. In other situations, the overall morality of the situation is much less clear. In those situations I think persistent resentment is not mandatory and possibly it is not even permissible. This is because by cultivating persistent resentment it is not only yourself that you are relegating to a life of hate, anger and total involvement with a past that cannot be vindicated. There is no punishment that anyone can impose that can help Amery to live on. And what he expects demands that all others, too, will act on the same resentment.

Again, we need to distinguish reconciliation from both forgiving and forgetting. There are situations in which forgiving is immoral. There are situations in which forgetting is immoral. I cannot think of a situation in which wanting to be reconciled is immoral. It is permissible to think that you don't want to make the effort. But I don't think that it is mandatory because I think that for you to say: "I will not be reconciled with that", is in fact to say: "I don't have enough regard for my life and in most situations for the life and welfare of others to make me think of our future".

This is so crucial to me because, here and now, I am not thinking about the Holocaust, or about a clear situation of evil. I am concerned, as many of us are, all the
time, with our struggle with the Palestinians, and with individuals struggling with agonizing memories of their own past. I think that our dream is to reach reconciliation with the Palestinians. I think many of the Palestinians are saying something very similar to what Amery is saying: "You wronged us. You dispossessed us. It was like that from the beginning. It was imminent in Zionism. We cannot legitimize you and we are not going to legitimize you. We are going to upset the reality. You are stronger now but we are not giving you what you really want, which is for us to let us open a new page and move on together".

I understand that attitude. It reflects a very powerful and deep-seated feeling. But I don't accept it or justify it. I reject this sentiment in them not only because it means that I will have to fight them forever. This attitude dooms both of us to a tragic life together. True, sometimes moral requirements do lead to tragic consequences, but I don't think this is necessarily the case. In this case, reconciliation is permissible and it is moral and it may lead us away from tragedy.

A strong argument against reconciliation is that it is a form of appeasing the villain and the powerful. Appeasement is not very noble, nor is it often successful. I do not agree that reconciliation is like appeasement. And it is sometimes stupid to appease. The matter must be decided by sober appraisals of the future. Appeasement is about averting a risk by giving its source some quick fix. Reconciliation is the very sober, not sentimental decision, concerning our own attitude. It is based on the decision that, despite the fact I was wronged in the past, I am not going to let myself be stuck in the past or in just wishing to take revenge for it. I am going to reconcile.
There are many ways of reconciling. They include repressing the past to permit avoiding it, or facing it and acting by way of asking for punishment, taking some vengeance, requiring recognition, or forgiving. What is common to all forms is my decision that I would like to make a better future for myself and for others, and to the extent necessary, I will not limit myself to acting on the wrongs of the past.

Some of these situations of anger and reconciliation are found within the family. Some children are so angry with their parents that they cannot reconcile. Reconciliation in this context is the idea that one wants to move on -- either by making peace with the members of the family themselves, or by accepting that this is impossible and deciding to invest in our lives instead of spending all our energies on wanting to make the past different.

Therefore I conclude that reconciliation is, on the whole, desirable on both the individual and the collective level.

If this is the case, how do we get there? Here, obviously, I cannot give any detailed guidelines. But I will indicate several "yes"s and "no"s.

I do not think that it is always necessary to agree on the truth in order to reconcile. In fact, sometimes it is impossible to agree on the truth, and if the wish and the need to reconcile is strong enough and valid enough, it is better to agree not to agree on a truth and to move on towards reconciliation.

How to go about this depends on our understanding of what reconciliation presupposes. I noted earlier that the possibility of reconciliation depends on the two parties (or the individual with him/herself), being sure that they can afford to let go of the
anger and the feeling of being wronged in the past. In order to be sure that they can do that, they must trust either their own strength or the goodwill of the other. So one route to reconciliation is the creation of conditions that can create a beginning of mutual trust. If even this is hard, at least a stable balance of power must be established, so that the parties have some guarantees that the wrongs of the past will not be repeated in the future. These guarantees depend on accepting that the other person is there as much as we are; that we are groups or individuals with equal rights and equal dignity and that we need to look each other in the face and accept that at the deepest level.

I think that part of the anger that we heard about from Amery and part of the problem that we have with the Palestinians is the fact that there is a feeling that this is not done; that there is no recognition of a realization of the fact that the wrongs were done and of the need to move forward, in some sense, together.

There is one mode of reaching reconciliation that I participated in. It taught me a lot and I think it is a good illustration of a possible process. This is the covenant that I drafted with Rabbi Yaacov Medan on Religion and State issues in Israel among the Jewish public. I speak about this as a process of reconciliation because the person I worked with was someone I would not have even met, and with whom I would not have discussed issues, had we not deliberately decided that we wanted to work together to reach an agreement. People in our respective circles clearly have feelings that the other group has wronged them in the past and threatens to wrong them again. We had an actual wish to reconcile, and if we did not have that wish, no miracle would have happened.

Another element of this process was that we knew we were not going to convert one another. We knew that Rabbi Medan was not going to end up a "secularist" or liberal, and
that I was not going to become an "observer" or a non-liberal. We knew that and accepted
that. We also knew that our perceptions of reality, of what was meaningful, of who
controls the world, of the ultimate truths of existence, were different and often
contradictory. We did not try to change that. Instead, we tried to build shared "rules of the
game" that would give our respective groups security in working and living together.
These "rules of the game" may sound formal and uninteresting -- as if they do not touch
the real issues. But they indicate the joint decision that we have made that we want to
open a new page, and in this new page we want to give each other guarantees that we are
going to respect one another's basic commitments. Happily, within this general agreement
about "rules of the game" we could also propose arrangements that would significantly
minimize the areas of conflict and friction and vulnerability that have led to the feeling of
past wrongs.

I want to conclude on an optimistic note. Reconciliation is good and desirable, and
hopefully, it may lead to a better possibility of existence for individuals and groups.