

# Feature story

## Riane Eisler: *World can be divided into domination societies and partnership societies*

By



MARTIN ZEILIG

Riane Eisler was born in Vienna, and was a child refugee with her parents from the Holocaust, growing up in Cuba and then in the United States.

Her work as a systems scientist and cultural historian shows how we can construct a more equitable and less violent world based on partnership rather than domination. She is best known for her books, including *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future* (now in 27 foreign editions and 57 U.S. printings), and, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* (hailed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as “a template for the better world we have been so urgently seeking”).

Her latest book, co-authored with anthropologist Douglas Fry, *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* (Oxford University Press, 2019), combines her original research with the latest findings from the social and biological sciences, especially neuroscience.

Eisler is president of the Center for Partnership Studies (CPS), Editor-in-Chief of the Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies at the University of Minnesota, and a tireless advocate for human rights (she pioneered the expansion of human



Riane Eisler

rights to include the majority of humanity: women and children). She keynotes conferences nationally and internationally and speaks of applications of the partnership model at corporations, universities, and platforms such as the United Nations.

She has received many honors including the Nuclear Peace Leadership award (earlier awarded to the Dalai Lama). Her other books include

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the award-winning *Tomorrow's Children*, *Sacred Pleasure*, and *Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life*, documenting the key role of women's status in a nation's quality of life. For more information, see [www.rianeeisler.com](http://www.rianeeisler.com) and [www.centerforpartnership.org](http://www.centerforpartnership.org).

Dr. Eisler consented to an email interview with *The Jewish Post & News*.

**JP&N:** How did your childhood influence your future path in life as cultural historian, lawyer and educator (among other things)?

**RE:** My passion for helping build a more equitable, less violent world is deeply rooted in my early experiences as a Jewish child refugee from the Holocaust. On Crystal Night, my father was dragged away by the Gestapo, but my mother miraculously obtained his release, and we fled my native Vienna.

My parents were able to obtain an entry permit to Cuba, where I saw the MS St. Louis, with 937 men, women, and children aboard, turned back to Nazi Europe. I grew up in poverty in the slums of Havana until my parents were able to get back on their feet, and there learned that most of my extended family – grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins – were murdered in Nazi concentration camps. These were traumatic events, but years later, after graduate school, marriage, and working as an attorney, they led to my research and discovery of what kind of social system supports our human capacities for consciousness, caring, and creativity, or alternately, for insensitivity, cruelty, and destructiveness.

**JP&N:** What do you mean by the domination model and the partnership model of society?

**RE:** Early in my research it became clear that to identify the core components of more equitable, non-violent societies we have to go beyond old social categories such as right versus left, religious vs. secular, Eastern vs. Western, Northern vs. Southern, and so forth.

To begin with, societies in every one of these familiar categories have been violent, unjust,

and repressive - be they secular Western societies like Hitler's rightist Nazi Germany or Stalin's leftist Soviet Union, or secular Eastern ones like Kim Jung Un's leftist regime, or religious societies, such as fundamentalist Iran, ISIS, or the Taliban, or the religious fundamentalists in the West today. Moreover, these conventional categories are woefully incomplete: they pay scant, if any, attention to the majority of humanity: women and children.

The problem is that if we only look at part of a picture, we can't see the whole picture. This is why the analytical method called the study of relational dynamics introduced by my research takes into account the *whole* of humanity, both its male and female halves; the *whole* of our lives, not just politics and economics as conventionally defined but our family and other intimate relations; and the *whole* of history, including that long span of millennia we call prehistory. Looking at this more complete picture, we see two distinct social configurations that keep repeating themselves historically and cross culturally: *the domination system* and *the partnership system*.

By contrast, societies that orient to the partnership side of the partnership-domination social scale have a very different core configuration. We see examples in cultures as varied as prehistoric societies such as Catal Huyuk, where there are no signs of destruction through warfare for over 1,000 years, and contemporary societies such as the La Paz Zapotec of Mexico, the Minangkabau of Sumatra, and European nations such as Sweden, Finland, and Norway that have been trying to leave behind domination and violence, and where there is high valuing of caring for people and nature. These are not ideal societies, but they are more equitable and peaceful.

If we are serious about educating for peace, it follows that we need more partnership-oriented families where parenting is authoritative rather than authoritarian and the use of force is not considered normal.

**JP&N:** Who are the people, both past and present, you most admire?

**RE:** Among people from the past I admire are Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century pioneered what we today call the movement for women's rights, and, Theodor Herzl, who recognized the need for Zionism, for a Jewish state where, after millennia of persecution, Jews again have their own nation.

More contemporary leaders I admire include founders of Israel such as David Ben Gurion and Golda Meir, who combined idealism with pragmatism. They include people working to end traditions of scapegoating and in-group versus out-group prejudice (which are built into domination systems), like Nelson Mandela who tried to bring harmony between black and white people in South Africa; Ruth Ginsburg, who fought for reproductive justice for women (a huge issue in a world of unnecessary exponential population growth that is overwhelming our planet's carrying capacity); my husband and partner David Loye (who has written tirelessly about how Charles Darwin actually said that in human evolution we must pay attention to factors such as mutuality and moral sensitivity), and the many thousands of women, men, and increasingly also young people, today working for a more just, caring, and less violent world.

Happy Rosh Hashanah

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Best wishes for the New Year to our clients and friends.

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