

SHADOWS AND LIGHT: ENCOUNTERS IN THE HOLY LAND

A large gray poster with strong red lettering proclaims *Nakba*. The Catastrophe. 1948. The year of celebration by Israelis for the founding of their state. A year of catastrophe for the Palestinians. The dramatic photograph shows a child crying, alone. Two adults, clearly Palestinians, move behind him, against a background of sand, sky and refugee tents. The poster hangs in Hebron, in the Al-Watan Center for Nonviolence, in the midst of this most volatile of cities in the West Bank.

I am in Hebron as a facilitator of seminars in Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding, a task that I share with two Palestinian colleagues. That a center for the study and practice of nonviolence exists in Hebron is an achievement. That I, a woman, an American and a Jew, am teaching in this center, is a wonder. The *Nakba* poster haunts me, reminding me of the complexity of making peace in the Holy Land, of how much history and sacred ground must be touched and acknowledged for Israelis and Palestinians to move forward together.

In the closing moments of the three-day seminar, our Palestinian participants ask me directly for feedback. What do I think of them? What do I think of their efforts to make peace, to learn new skills, to struggle with impossible problems toward a better world for their children? Most of them are men, some with important positions in their local government and ministries, others in professional positions like medicine or education. Some few are women, mostly university students, free to attend seminars before the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood keep them home. My Arabic translator from Bethlehem attends graduate school in Edinburgh; his Palestinian-Scottish brogue adds to the melange of this strange situation.

Unplanned, the words tumble out. "*You are so much like your Israeli counterparts,*" I tell them. "*Your voices and gestures, the way you love to argue, your abundant hospitality, devotion to your families, your love for this land, your passion.*" Our small, crowded classroom is still; their eyes are accepting, so I go on. "*In so many ways you are mirrors of each other, reflecting the light and shadows of your traumas and histories. It breaks my heart to feel the distance between you: the intense fear, the stereotypes, mistrust and yes, hatred. How I hope you will find the way forward together, so that you do not destroy yourselves and each other.*"

Ardent and innovative Israelis and Palestinians are forging an unprecedented experiment in inter-group dialogue. Although I and my fellow peacebuilders work in many settings of intense inter-communal conflict around the world, nowhere else have we witnessed this proliferation of dialogue groups. Israeli and Palestinian schoolchildren attend coexistence workshops, women from the two cultures share their concerns about the effects of violence, engineers meet over water rights and distribution, university students and academics explore common interests, and religious leaders compare Jewish, Muslim and Christian beliefs and practices. Dialogue partners struggle intensely, but they continue on. The fact that so many do not give up, and that new dialogues sprout like spring flowers in the desert, gives me hope for the future that despite all odds, Israelis and Palestinians are creating a way forward, saving themselves from mutual destruction. In the spirit of peace, perhaps these two profoundly wounded peoples will choose to share their Holy Land rather than destroy their own soul and that of their neighbor.

Dialogue offers many Palestinians and Israelis their first opportunity to know each other face to face, to have a relationship different from that of "occupier" or "terrorist." *"Prior to this encounter,"* a Palestinian reflects, *"the only Israelis I knew were soldiers who marched through our streets with guns."* While dialogue groups neither end hostilities nor bring peace, these humanizing encounters between adversaries do prepare the ground for peace, weaving the fabric of community that will either uphold or destroy peace accords and legal agreements. Establishing intensive interaction between Palestinian and Israeli citizens by means of in-depth, structured conversations allows fear and hostility to be gradually replaced by warmth and mutual respect. Actual contact, especially if sustained, can contradict preconceived notions of the "other," often dramatically shifting long-held perceptions and softening people hardened by years of warfare. After her dialogue experience in Nablus, an Israeli wrote: *"I have gained a deeper and more comprehensive emotional connection to the Palestinians. I feel I know them better. They are more individualized for me, and I know more about the differences between us, especially cultural."*

Within the state of Israel, Arab citizens number approximately 20% of the population. The Abraham Fund has been instrumental in nurturing and supporting grassroots Israeli Jewish and Israeli Arab dialogue projects while the Israeli Education Ministry promotes inter-ethnic dialogue among its Jewish and Arab pupils, providing the only substantive contact for these students who live in different neighborhoods and attend separate schools. For the Israeli Jewish population, life experiences, historical trauma, economics, insecurity and deep philosophical understandings about the nature of a state, the role of religion, and relationships with their Arab neighbors create profound problems and tear at the fabric of society. Dialogue is sometimes utilized to provide a context to explore differences between secular and religious Israeli Jews as well as between those on the political right and left, not necessarily to agree but at least to acknowledge each other's passionate and deeply-rooted needs and fears.

Because dialogue is extremely arduous between peoples with traumatic histories and habituated enmity toward each other, noted Israeli educator Haviva Bar believes that participants should be selected for *"...the greatest potential for changing their views: those who are socially sensitive, cognitively open, emotionally empathetic, and psychologically motivated to change."* Finding such people may not be as difficult as it sounds; many Israelis and Palestinians would prefer to live as good neighbors, willing to acquire the skills to build the collaborative relationships required for a lasting peace. I believe that many kindly people on both sides of the conflict feel frustrated with the political process and wish to demonstrate their concerns with a personal and tangible gesture of concern. Dialogue may be a first step through which the process of citizen empowerment and responsibility develops. As facilitators, it is our hope that these empathic and motivated participants will return to their own communities with greater appreciation for the sensitivities of the other, and will represent the voices of the others as individuals with equally valid claims to identity and security. Reflecting on the Nablus dialogues *"Transformation of Suffering,"* Israeli organizer Marcia Kreisel commented: *"In our exchange of views on the situation between Israel and Palestine and in our emotional sharing of the suffering experienced by each group as a result of the conflict, a feeling of mutual understanding and compassion arose between us."*

The issue of asymmetry looms large in Palestinian-Israeli dialogues. The two communities are fundamentally asymmetrical in opportunities for education and self-actualization, in power and resources, in wealth and privilege. The greater comfort of Israelis in the psycho-social environment of group encounter and community organizing creates another asymmetry within the dialogue. Furthermore, some of the Israelis who develop and participate in dialogues came to Israel from societies like the US, England and South Africa, bringing long experience in inter-group relations and practice in social change. Palestinian and Israeli societies create different sensibilities, distinct behaviors and proprieties. Gender relations and acceptable behavior for women are the most visible sign of the many subtle inter-cultural differences and asymmetries that dialogue groups must acknowledge, manage and transcend. In fact one positive outcome of bi-communal dialogue is a shift from fear of difference to appreciation for the richness and depth of diverse cultures. *"Our theme is understanding each other,"* writes dialogue expert Dr. Ron Kronish. *"By meeting face to face, the participants learn about the range of identities in both communities."*

In Akko, an Israeli city with a substantial Arab population, I asked a mixed group of Israeli Arab and Jewish women what they most admired about each other. The responses were quite uniform: the Arab women envied the freedom of movement and educational opportunities afforded to Israeli women, while the Israeli women looked nostalgically at the nurturing extended family relationships of the Arab community. These women appeared secure in their own identity but understood the positive gain of learning from the strengths of a differently organized culture.

Tolerance and understanding developed in face to face meetings, however, do not in themselves lead to national liberation, to peace, to economic well-being or to justice. Power asymmetry: political, economic, and social must be addressed between Israelis and Palestinians as well as among the Jewish and Arab citizens of the state of Israel. Indeed, issues of power and privilege often dominate dialogue. It is in this arena that the radically different needs and motivations of both parties emerge. For some Israelis, I observe a need to dialogue with the other for the sake of human connection and shared destiny, perhaps to assuage the guilt of an oppressing government, perhaps to end their complicity as a bystander to that oppression. For Palestinians, whose lives are much more difficult, the needs are instrumental: to involve the Israelis as partners in seeking liberation, in ending occupation. Palestinians request that their Israeli dialogue partners join them in demonstrations to pressure the Israeli government to lift border closures, reduce military presence, end house demolitions and the spread of settlements, and increase economic opportunity. For Israeli Arabs, second class citizenship in a burgeoning economy and urbanizing population create demands for justice, equal opportunity, dignity and partnership. The less powerful groups needs their empowered counterpart for tangible social change, while those with more power seek humanization and relationship, sometimes shunning direct action. This asymmetry adds to the complexity of dialogue, challenging the core definition of what dialogue is and whom it serves.

Mistrust and misapprehension of each other's motives arise from both recent history with each other and from historical legacies of trauma and misery. The ghosts of past atrocities haunt the present. Each party longs to be acknowledged and validated for its unique historical tragedy, with its expulsions, isolation and degradation. Until these stories are

told, believed and affirmed by the other, recognized as legitimate experiences, the dialogues remain frozen in accusation and mutual recrimination.

According to noted writer and editor Michael Lerner:

Although emerging from very different historical experiences, Israelis and Palestinians suffer from a set of historically generated psychological scars that prevent them from acting in accordance with their own rational self-interests. Both sides have experienced real powerlessness, but they have developed psychological frames of self-understanding that make them more powerless than the current reality requires...Each side carefully nourishes the memory of its wounds and uses each current development to further confirm for itself the impossibility of transcending the current dynamic...In order to be viable, any strategies for peace in the Middle East must explicitly address the deep psychic wounds that have so crippled all the parties involved.

In the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue groups, I often notice competition for preeminence in suffering. Furthermore, for Palestinians it is essential that Israelis acknowledge that they were not the cause of either the diaspora or the Holocaust. They were the innocent victims of the desperate, dispossessed refugees of Europe who in turn dispossessed them. This wrenching irony of the suffering of the Jews transmuting into the catastrophe or *Nakba* of the Palestinians is never lost on the Palestinians. It is only when Israelis and Palestinians recognize themselves and each other as profoundly traumatized and fatefully intertwined populations burdened by abandonment, betrayal and consequent eternal insecurity, that the process of negotiation for a shared future can begin. Haviva Bar writes: "*One must understand and acknowledge the existing reality--however difficult and complex--before attempting to fulfill aspirations and desires for a better and more harmonious reality.*" Transformation of suffering moves forward from the acknowledgement of the burdens of the past. Discernment of Israelis and Palestinians as distinct beings with unique personal stories then becomes possible.

The dialogues between Palestinians in Nablus and Jews from several Israeli cities owes much of its success to Rawda Basir from Nablus, a visionary, risk-taking social activist and professional speech pathologist. Rawda, who spent 8 years in Israeli prisons before the Intifada, comments that "*for a very long time Palestinians and Israelis kept very high emotional borders between them. Our goal is to cross these borders.*" In partnership with an equally visionary Israeli group from the Rapprochement Center and Face to Face Dialogue Project, the Nablus dialogues have yielded genuine intercultural friendships and loyalties. Members phone to console each other when tragedy strikes either community, and the group leaders struggle on together despite border closings, backlashes, community resistance, despair and disappointments. When dialogue seems at a low ebb, the partners experiment with varied forms of education and contact, such as classes for Nablus midwives or counseling for women. "*There are always some stereotypes to dispel,*" Rawda acknowledges, "*and trust must be earned.*"

In Hebron, in the room with the poster of *Nakba*, there are no Israelis present. This seminar is not a dialogue but a workshop in nonviolent conflict resolution for Palestinian community leaders. These Hebronites look forward to the normalization of political relations that will end their isolation, increase freedom of movement and enable them to

participate freely in bi-communal activities. Until then, training opportunities enhance their skills, provoking collegial exchange, heated debates and new insights into Hebron's enormous challenges. It is very much to their credit to their generosity and open-mindedness that I, an American and a Jew, am welcomed to share my experiences in the field of conflict transformation and peacebuilding with them.

Inter-ethnic dialogues provide moments of significant transformation. Perhaps they are a precursor to peace, a promise to the future. I wish dialogues to be more than a humanization process, important though it is to humanize the enemy. I also hope that dialogues will lead to actions to rectify the wrongdoings, postponements and evasions of governments and the distortions of media. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, an Israeli Arab now a professor in peace and conflict studies in the US, worries that without action, dialogues reinforce the status quo of asymmetry and disempowerment for Palestinians. On the basis of extensive and critical research into encounters between Israeli Arab and Jewish school children, he writes that although stereotypes and prejudice are reduced and friendships established within the dialogue, *"there is no evidence that such an impact endures beyond the immediate period of the encounter."* Abu-Nimer thus recommends that *"encounters teach the skills that enable participants to analyze structural aspects of their national or ethnic conflict"* and that action activities be completed by participants after the encounter. Hopefully these kinds of suggestions will increase the effects of dialogue and spread sufficient contact-based good will in both communities to shift the decades of demonization and adversarial relationships based on a zero-sum concept of winner and loser.

Those of us who experienced the encounter movements of the 1960's and 70's as well as the women's conscious raising movements, can recall the seismic shifts of awareness as our long-held beliefs and behaviors were challenged by the realities of others. Similarly in dialogue, a veil of clouds might lift, exposing a completely different world-view and forcing open the doors of perception. If continuously reinforced, such exposure expands consciousness, creating fresh norms that may have a life-changing, culture-changing impact. For example, when Israeli schoolchildren returned to classes in the fall of 1999, they found a new history curriculum that speaks more frankly about the expulsions of Palestinians in 1947 and the ignoble aspects of creating statehood. This revision, although late, could herald the recognition of legitimate Palestinian grievances and encourage a more tolerant and kindhearted standard of behavior.

In the Mid East, passions run high. *"What we all need is to balance the intensity of passion with a large dose of compassion,"* writer-activist Yehezkel Landau commented. I know that passion arises quickly and compassion must be developed and nurtured. But I also remind myself that no other task is more important for our collective lives than cultivating the capacity to empathize, to reconcile, to forgive and to fulfill our potential as human beings who can transform suffering into boundless compassion.

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