

Time for an Honest Conversation Between Israelis & Palestinians

By Jordana Kagan

“And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” - Isaiah 2:4

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Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World) is one of the basic tenets of Judaism. Inspiring, motivating, infused with kindness, Tikkun Olam is the compass by which Jews navigate the world. As such, we must advocate for an honest, open, multi-dimensional conversation concerning Israelis and Palestinians. As an American born Jew who has lived in Israel for the past ten years, I can attest that it is much more nuanced than the narrative our religious leaders and politicians present.

There is divergent thinking on both sides, and perceptions do not always accurately reflect true intentions. It is counterproductive and dangerous to stereotype an entire group, to project assumptions of ill will - especially when one lacks authentic, personal interaction, instead relying on stories from second hand sources with dubious agendas (both Israeli and Palestinian propaganda). Only by engaging on the ground in face to face dialogue, can we begin to parse the issues - the deeply painful, intergenerational issues of belonging and acceptance. This was something I learned while touring Ramallah with Husam, my guide. His matter-of-fact descriptions of the conditions Palestinians endured, allowed for curiosity. By releasing the emotional charge, Husam emboldened my curiosity. Without the need to defend myself, I was able to open my ears and my heart. I was able to listen. And I agreed with a lot of what I heard.

I learned how hard it is for Palestinians, not solely because of the Israeli government, but also because of their own fractured Palestinian leadership. I learned about corruption and coercion, about broken promises and betrayal, about fear. I learned that there are many non-violent Palestinians who want to live peacefully as Palestinians. Not as criminals. Not as refugees. As equal citizens. Israel's dominance is not helping their plight to become partners.

Why not? Because of the other Palestinians, the ones committing terrorist attacks. Stabbings, bombings, car rammings. Aren't their leaders trying to destroy Israel? To kill all the Jews? To drive them into the sea? There are several ways to probe this.

Firstly, Yitzhak Rabin, the former Israeli Prime Minister, was assassinated by a fellow Jewish Israeli in 1995. Rabin was pursuing the peace process with Palestinians, but his murderer vehemently disagreed with the approach and violently ended Rabin's life. With it, hope for peace abated as many Palestinians viewed this as proof that the Jews would never accept their nationhood.

Further, it is worth remembering that in the past, Palestinian leaders have used coercion and violence to achieve and maintain power. In some cases, Palestinians who were considered to be collaborators with Israel faced serious repercussions. This may explain why those who do want peace and prefer non-violent negotiations temper their demonstrations of outward enthusiasm. However, they do exist. It is a mistake to assume all Palestinians desire to follow in the footsteps of Hamas and aspire to terrorism as a means of achieving a

liberated Palestine (Fatah renounced armed resistance in the 1990's).

And yet, fear, manufactured by the government and perpetuated by the media, propels this perspective forward. Personal bias also plays a role. People choose their friends and navigate in circles that tend to reinforce their already solidified beliefs. Under these circumstances, there isn't much room for growth. This is unfortunate because the opportunity to learn from one another is rich and ripe.

There are large numbers of Palestinians working across all Israeli industries. I met one of my dear friends, Mahmood, after a shoulder injury. He is a physical therapist and a Muslim. He has a family and a job. He wants the same thing that everyone wants - to live and love in peace. During my treatment sessions we would talk about anything and everything. On more than one occasion I left the clinic in tears from fits of laughter. Mahmood is an amazing person. He's not an anomaly, many are like him. Fortunately, there are multiple grassroots efforts attempting to broach the charged topic of identity and facilitate collaboration between people like me and Mahmood.

One such organization is Seeds of Peace. By introducing Israeli and Palestinian teenagers, Seeds of Peace enables them to forge relationships rooted in individual humanity and work to become ambassadors for peace. These courageous young adults are breaking the mold for traditional definitions of Jews and Palestinians and moving forward together. The organization's extensive roster of fellows continue to effect social, political, and economic changes through a variety of programs across the globe.

Also in the trenches is Sayed Kashua, a

renown Palestinian-Israeli author. By writing his books, articles, and screenplays in Hebrew, Kashua attempted to unite the Palestinians and Israelis through a common narrative. Unfortunately, he left Israel because of Israeli violence against Arabs, which included the kidnapping and horrific murder of Mohammed Abu Khdeir, a 14 year old boy who was tortured and burned alive in 2014 by an Israeli man and two Israeli teenagers*. The brutal reality is that tragedy exists on both sides. However, there remains an unrealized hope for the future. With his friend, respected Israeli author Etgar Keret, the duo tour internationally and lecture about the virtues of respect and coexistence. By seeking similarities, they built a shared humanity.

Their paradigm mirrors another noble organization, The Compassionate Listening Project, which works to bring understanding and unity to people in conflict. Their workshops are instrumental in creating brotherhood through communication. In this way, they empower us to advocate for each other, to support one another.

As Americans, we can't vote to change Israeli policies regarding Palestinians. We certainly won't effect change in the jurisdiction of Hamas or Fatah. But by extending our hearts and offering compassion to those on the other side of the line, then perhaps we may begin to heal the wounds of the past. It is only a beginning, but is the place we must begin if we hope to contribute to Tikkun Olam.

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Jordana Kagan is an educator, lecturer, and athletic coach. She has worked in NYC, London, and Israel.

You can contact her via her website: www.beatsbooksbarbells.com