Daring to Dream: An Israeli and Palestinian Vision of a Better Future

Do you know that all conflicts come to an end? Oppression cannot last forever. The desire to suppress will eat away at our souls, the willful ignorance of what happens around us will corrupt the future of our children, and the will to hope can be snuffed out if we choose to give up. And giving up is easy. One of the factors that sustains and escalates our conflict, according to Israeli and Palestinian scholars in peacebuilding, is our inability to imagine a peaceful future. We cannot achieve what we cannot imagine; we cannot do what we cannot dream.

As practitioners and researchers in peacebuilding, we try and articulate a dream of a better future, for ourselves, and with our participants. Yet, we often hear others disregard these dreams with a variety of excuses. “This conflict is too complicated.” “This situation is hopeless.” “We cannot accomplish peace because of radical Islam.” “They don’t want to live in peace with us.” And even many well-meaning religious sentiments like, “There can be no solution until Jesus returns.”

We would like to give you a glimpse into our imagination, our vision, our dream. We invite you into our understanding of a better future, which we wish to draw into the present with our prayers, with our minds, with our hearts and with our hands. We refuse all the previous excuses, even if well-intentioned. We refuse to be oppressors. We refuse to be victims. We refuse to be ignorant. We refuse to give up hope. We refuse the easy way. We refuse to think we are beyond redemption because of the complications. We refuse to remain an intractable conflict. We refuse to defer our peace to other generations and centuries because we are too lazy or too unimaginative to dream a better future. We refuse many things. And we affirm and accept many others.

The Bible is a text that informs our imagination, that encourages us to see God’s work in the past, and see his desire to set right the injustice and oppression of the present. The judges, the prophets, the lone female voices we sometimes hear, the Messiah Jesus, the disciples, and the community of the faithful that hold these figures and teachings close to their hearts all play a role in influencing us today. We see this culminate in God’s gift of his son, Jesus, who modeled for us an example of redemptive, righteous and compassionate living. In his death and resurrection, he broke down barriers between God and humanity, and between competing human relationships. Jesus demonstrated how to walk in freedom, even when facing disapproval from spiritual leaders, even when living under occupation. One central factor that unites these figures is their hope tied to action. God’s vision of something better permeates their reality, and his hope becomes their hope, and they lend their hands to his vision.

The hope and action we read in the Scriptures propel us to see beyond yesterday, and to imagine today what we wish to see in our lifetime. We imagine a place where our communities are not divided by language, but enhanced by the richness of their differences. A place where our ethnic distinctiveness is appreciated, and encouraged.

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This past September 5, we had another young mother’s meeting. After a lot of last minute changes, we had 13 participants attend, along with a translator, four babysitters, and 19 children.

Does this begin to give you an idea of how full our meetings are, even with only partial attendance from our mothers? This time, we met to discuss listening. After a time of worship and prayer, we delved into this subject. It sounds like a basic topic, but the directions we can take this discussion are numerous. It is relevant to us in how we raise our children, in our relationships with our spouse, in our relationships with those in our communities, to our co-workers, to those with whom we are in intergroup conflict, among others. We briefly touched on all these aspects at our meeting as we learned how to become effective listeners.

Listening is more than the physiological act of hearing. It is a psychological act of interpretation where we try and understand the meaning intended by the communicator. Christian theologian and counselor David Augsburger writes, “Being heard is so close to being loved, that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable.”

In our meeting we focused on how we can be open to listening, and how we can practice attentiveness in our hearing. We also learned how to listen in spite of our disagreement, and how we can respect the other person even when we disagree with their views entirely. One of our ladies shared a devotional from Matthew 13 on the sower and different types of soil, and we reflected on how we can become like the good soil and receive the message that others and God intend for us to hear. Afterwards, it became clear that some of the ladies wanted the opportunity to exercise their listening skills through a discussion about our challenging summer. As a result, we organized a discussion over coffee on September 17.

A few ladies from both sides came with their children, and while the children played outside in a courtyard, we sat, drank coffee and talked. To begin, we looked at a timeline of events from the beginning of hostilities until the final ceasefire. The timeline was comprised of events gathered from Israeli sources marked in blue, Palestinian sources marked in red, and when the sources overlapped in their recounting of events, they were marked in black.

Interestingly, there were many more significant dates on the Palestinian side than the Israeli one, and very few events the two sides had in common. Israel calls the events of the summer Operation Protective Edge, and Palestinians call it War on Gaza 2014. The Palestinian accounting of events starts in April regarding prisoner releases and the PLO’s quest for increasing legitimacy in the international community. In June, the PLO and Hamas signed a reconciliation pact with the goal of creating a national government. Israel’s accounting of events begins in early June with the Hamas and PLO signing a reconciliation pact, with Assisi’s appointment as President in July and Hamas’ subsequent fight with Egypt regarding smuggling and tunnels.

Both sides recount the early June kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teens in the West Bank. The Palestinian side then recounts that the next month, two Palestinian workers were run over and killed, and both sides note that the following day, a Palestinian boy from East Jerusalem was kidnapped and murdered. Days later, rockets were fired from Gaza, and Israel quickly responded. The account of events is quite different in what each side sees as a relevant event preceding, beginning, escalating, or continuing the hostilities.
In our discussion, we decided on a set of guidelines we would follow when listening to each other. We agreed to use “I” language as we learned in the previous listening lesson, to let one person speak at a time, and to let them finish what they were saying, among other things. In order to exercise active listening, we all received a handful of multi-colored beads to drop into cups while each person spoke.

We had five colors, representing five different reactions while listening:
1) I empathize with her pain,
2) I feel comfortable with what she shared,
3) I feel empowered by what she shared,
4) I feel uncomfortable with something she shared,
5) I feel a strong emotion in reaction to what she shared.

Each lady took a turn sharing the summer’s effect on them personally, what they saw, what they heard, and how it made them feel. Some of our Israeli ladies and Jerusalemite Palestinians shared about the tense atmosphere and prevailing fears in the city this summer. There were Jewish attacks on Palestinians who were walking in West Jerusalem, and some Jewish attempts to kidnap Palestinian children. A Jerusalemite Palestinian shared her fear of going into West Jerusalem, or going out at all during this time. An Israeli participant shared her fear of bringing her children outside to play.

As there were Jewish attempts to kidnap Palestinian children, she feared reprisals of Palestinian attempts to kidnap Jewish children (which never actually happened) and was extra vigilant in watching her children and keeping them close when outside. Several of our Palestinian ladies live in Beit Sahour near Bethlehem, where a misdirected stray rocket destroyed a house. They empathized with some of the fears of our Israeli ladies who discussed how it felt to wake their children in the night, or gather them during the day to bring them to a sheltered room when the siren sounded. The Palestinian ladies did not have sirens, and they shared how they felt for their Gazan compatriots who never had a siren before Israel’s attacks.

During this meeting, we practiced listening and the most common emotion expressed in the bead activity was “I empathize with her pain.” We learned about each woman’s struggle and fear this past summer, and the painful memories we each hold in our hearts as a result. It was cathartic sharing at this meeting, giving voice to hurts we suffered and we felt for others. This meeting was also affirming, simply knowing that we all carry the burden of the past few months together, and that together we pray for something better.

~ Musalaha Publications Department

We imagine a place where we meet not only in spite of our disagreement, but also because of our disagreements, knowing that in fellowship our differences strengthen us, not weaken us. We envision confident relationships, where we make space for each other, allowing the other person to change us, as iron sharpens iron. We imagine a world where we can be strong enough to allow people to speak their minds without being threatened by divergent opinions, interpretations and theologies.

This is a place where we welcome the other, just as we welcome the same. We envision a world where men and women have equal opportunities to be who they were meant to be. Gender is a celebration of God’s creativity, not a criterion for discrimination.

This is a future that is worth the struggles and pain of the present. We wish to see our communities rise above this conflict, and offer a solution that is safe, just and truthful. We want our communities to realize that we need each other in order to understand why we are both here, and to know how we can go about building a better future. We have histories of pain, suffering and persecution. We reject the fatalism that says this is our present and future. We believe that God has a purpose for the Jewish people in this land. We believe that God has a purpose for the Palestinian people in this land.

Yet the protagonist in this is neither the Jewish people nor the Palestinian people, but God who seeks to draw us into His vision. This is a vision worth pursuing. It’s a vision big enough for the oppressed, big enough for the oppressors, big enough for the doubters, big enough for the hopeless. We remain confident of this:

[We] will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (Ps. 27:13).

~ By Shadia Qubti and Ambreen Ben-Shmuel
Young Adult Reflections after Gaza Conflict

On October 10, a group of young adults met in order to discuss the events of the past summer, and how they impacted each community. We began with a short presentation from Messianic Jewish, Israeli-Palestinian and Palestinian young adults outlining how the summer impacted them on a personal level, in their respective communities, and in their leaders’ response to the conflict.

All three people who spoke articulated the enormous amount of fear that each community felt throughout the war/operation. The speaker for the Palestinian side said it felt like the reconciliation process moved “100 steps backwards.” Each community felt the intensity of the situation with the Messianic Jewish speaker stating, “Reactions from people were really extreme, especially after the three kids were kidnapped and murdered and afterwards the kid from Shuafat was murdered. It was really scary and this heated the situation...” He also expressed the difficult emotions of being drafted as a reserve soldier after many years of not serving. He said that: “I lost my freedom all of sudden and my efforts of detachment [from the conflict] were halted.”

While the summer brought fear, the heated situation brought some form of unity on both sides. The Palestinian speaker shared that, “We felt empathy towards our brothers in Gaza. Despite the distance, the war gave us unity, unity among Christians and Muslims. This was evident in the old city of Jerusalem where Christians and Muslims would watch over each other’s’ backs; also unity between the Galilee, West Bank and Gaza. The war also strengthened the BDS [movement]; it is now more prevalent among the West Bank.”

The Israeli-Palestinian speaker shared that she felt stuck in the middle. Reflecting on her community and their mixed emotions, she said, “We felt in between; we don’t know how to define ourselves at war. We felt close to the Palestinians but we were in dilemma on who should we stand with. We felt frustration, living in Israel as an Arab, in the face of extremism. The other side was afraid to visit Arab places.” She also observed that Facebook was a warzone in itself and a Messianic Jewish participant echoed this stating, “[Part of the] war was on Facebook and as believers we have to participate in reconciliation and walk Jesus’ path. This war was a wake-up call for reconciliation.”

After the presentation, the participants split into three discussion groups depending on their community, Israeli, Israeli-Palestinian or Palestinian. They were each given two articles written by leaders in their own community. The articles represented two responses, one calling for reconciliation, and one more controversial piece utilizing inflammatory rhetoric in response to the conflict.

The purpose of this exercise was to look analytically at how we (as communities) respond during times of crisis. All participants agreed that there is a need to take more steps in understanding each other and toward reconciliation. They also agreed that much of the leadership in all three communities failed to publicly address the conflict adequately, and that we need to have stronger voices advocating for reconciliation and justice. We left this meeting with a strong feeling that this was a positive step to rejuvenate reconciliation work and we hope to explore further dialogue and understanding of how we react during times of conflict.

~ Jack Munayer
When I was offered the opportunity to attend this meeting, I said yes immediately. As a Danish volunteer, the opportunity to come closer to an understanding of how locals perceive the ongoing crisis was not one I wanted to miss. In Denmark, this is not a perspective that the media bothers telling us about.

When I went home after the meeting, one word stayed in my mind: fear. No matter which side you were on during the crisis, one felt a pervasive fear, a fear that permeated daily life. I had the impression that the war had shown the communities that it is important that we build bridges so as to understand each other. If the Christians are not united properly, and have a decent understanding of each other, then the reconciliation work takes a major hit when the communities undergo too much hardship. It seemed that this was shockingly evident during the Gaza crisis this summer.

It was fantastic to see that despite the internal problems of the community, people still wanted to show up and talk about the problems. We were still able to eat together after the meeting, and everybody spoke with each other across the different communities. The work of reconciliation seems to have set great roots in people, and I can only hope these roots will grow deeper through the future work of reconciliation.

~ Kasper

**Another Perspective:**

*Observations on Youth Adult Reflections after Gaza Conflict*

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~ Kasper
Dear Everybody,

The summer passed and the family achieved what seemed like the impossible: a 4 day trip to Scotland. We gathered together in Bolton from London, Cambridge, Israel, Bournemouth, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. We headed on our trip to Scotland in a hired van the size of a small house [upgraded but I think it is because nobody else wanted it] which was quite funny. Salim and I had to take being made fun of for being old and or old fashioned by 4 young men. Then we all went our separate ways, the night before van the size of a small house [upgraded but I think it is because nobody else wanted it] which was quite funny. Salim and I had to

Jack is living at home, working for Musalaha, deciding which MA to do, enjoyed Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, talks to himself for hours in his room.... Or I thought he did till I found out he is teaching English to Japanese people online. He is leading a group of Palestinians and Israelis on a trip to Berlin. This is a group of young adults, which of course he is one.

Daniel spent the summer studying at Cambridge UNI, and was a group leader for the American University. Now he is having a term at SOAS [School of Oriental/African Studies] in London. He started cooking a craze of stuffed vegetables which Jack seemed to do at the same time. He made the school football team for SOAS, but then hurt his ankle.

After his trip with Jack to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, John stayed in the UK to go to Kings College University, and is studying Politics/Religion/Society. He meets up with Daniel about once a week and they go to different churches that have a potluck or a Newcomers lunch! He is on the swim team and football team for Kings College. I receive pictures of food he has cooked or he says he has cooked. He has managed a haircut, a virus and written his first paper. He seems to be doing well as he never answers Facebook or Whatsapp, so I will take that as a good sign that he is busy and not lonely.

Sam also caught the bedbugs [same room as Daniel in Scotland] so here in Jerusalem he and I did an ‘Armageddon’ which nearly killed the stray cats three floors down. He has begun Grade 11, which means matriculation exams, and he is finding it hard to fit everything in with swimming. He has a part time job as an events waiter on Fridays and Saturdays. Sam is as tall as Daniel and the big question is whether he will he overtake Jack? He grew past Salim and I about two years ago.

The book launch for Through My Enemy’s Eyes (his new book) went well. Salim works out at the gym several times a week to combat stress and his waistline benefits too. This time next year he will be 60... which is unthinkable!

I’m still busy at home even though we are down to 4. Did a spot of teaching to teenage girls last month who seemed far more interested in the four boys volunteering than the message of God I was giving them! Right now it is my busy charity/bazaar season. I am happily busy and enjoy helping others through my ministry of commercial justice.

Christmas will soon be here and for two weeks we will all be together again, I probably will not be seen at this time as I will be caught under huge amounts of washing and food prep although I might make it to the Supermarket to re-stock.

Before Christmas Salim will travelling to Canada for two weeks. We don’t know what to do for Christmas this year, our good friends [we spent Christmas with for 25 years] have moved back to USA. Please send me a Christmas card to cheer me up .... I LOVE them and hang them up on the walls.

That’s all for now as I have to price at least 350 items tonight!

As always, with thanks,

Kay Munayer [for everybody].

PO Box 52110
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[for Christmas cards]

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