

The Power of the Heart: Compassionate Listening in Israel and Palestine

By Bonnie Sherr Klein

Several years ago, I “came out” in this magazine with my unhappiness about the behaviour of Israel towards the Palestinians (“There’s an Elephant in our Closet: The Personal and Collective Dangers of Suppressing Dialogue on Israel and Palestine,” March/April 2008.) As a progressive Jew, I could no longer tolerate the dissonance between the dream and the reality of Israel. My disclosure resonated with many others, whom I suspected might be a “silenced majority” of otherwise proud Jews.

Now it was time to “walk the talk.” I resolved to play a part, however small, in resolving this very Jewish problem. I would likely act in my own Diaspora community, but my work had to be grounded in the reality of life on the ground in the Holy Land. My husband Michael and I had spent precious times with friends and colleagues in Israel over the years. However, the ever more brutal post-Intifada Occupation, and a hardening of the hearts of our once-progressive Israeli friends, had pushed us away. I felt conflicted by the intense feelings on all sides, and needed to see for myself, to hear from a wide variety of Israelis and Palestinians. In retrospect, I think I wanted particularly to regain respect and love for my fellow Jews.

In late 2008, just before Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, Michael and I chose to be part of a Compassionate Listening Project delegation to Israel and the West Bank. (Gaza was closed to visitors.) Our 23 American and Canadian members were diverse in age, religion, and politics.

The founder and director of The Compassionate Listening Project (TCLP) is Leah Green, a Seattle-area Jew. One of her mentors was the Quaker peacemaker Gene Knudsen Hoffman, who taught, “An enemy is someone whose story



Peace dove on a wall with a target.

we have not heard.” Leah has been applying and evolving the practice in the Middle East for over 20 years, has led many delegations like ours, and most important, has trained a vast network of Palestinian and Israeli leaders. Michael and I were novices to CL, learning on the job, so what follows is a report on our limited experience, but we are continuing to learn.

Compassionate Listening has applications for family, community, and

workplace relationships as well as geographical areas of conflict. In CL, the listeners make it known that we are present to hear the other’s story. Our aim is to understand, not to debate, argue, judge, or promote our own agenda or solutions, although we do not necessarily agree. We ask clarifying questions, sometimes stating what we think we heard to see if we understood correctly. We try to control our own “triggers,” and usually experience some change in our point of view. CL is not merely passive; the listeners also speak from the heart, forging a connection that can bridge into meaningful dialogue because it is based on trust. When someone feels heard, a window is opened, and in that window is the possibility of movement.

Leah carefully invited a balance of Israelis and Palestinians to tell us their stories. Many, but certainly not all of our informants were peace activists in their communities. In over twenty intense sessions, we heard from passionate individuals and groups, in our hotels or their homes, in refugee camps, Jewish settlements, and Bedouin tents.

Our first evening set the tone for our trip. Two men who looked like very old friends came to our hotel in East Jerusalem. Ibrahim Khalid’s only son was deliberately run over by a settler, and died in his mother’s arms. Rami Elhanan’s 14-year old daughter was killed by a suicide bomb. Eventually both Ibrahim and Rami found their way through their deep pain and isolation to the

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continued on page 10

Continued from page 8

Bereaved Families Forum, comprised of over 500 people who have lost a close family member to the violence. “My brother Ibrahim and I have given over 1000 talks together. If we, who paid the highest price possible, can talk together, then anyone can. There is no freedom for the Palestinians without security for Israel, and no security for Israel without freedom for Palestinians. We have no choice. We have to find a solution.’

In poetic language, Ibrahim adds: “We have chosen talking, listening, understanding instead of the dark room alone. Our organization is preparing the land. We irrigate it with tears from our eyes. It is a small tree of hope, and all trees grow slowly. I am not sure I will benefit from its fruit, but I’m sure my two remaining daughters will.”

Our roster of storytellers continued for 12 days; some highlights:

Suleiman al-Hamri, the Palestinian co-founder of Combatants for Peace, who has spent a large part of his life since he was 15 in Israeli prisons for throwing stones.

Ester Golan, a child Holocaust survivor who has dedicated herself to reconciliation work between Germans and Jews.

We focused on the upcoming generations:

Ibrahim and Ghada Issa, a brother and sister who direct the Hope Flowers School near Bethlehem. The school was founded in 1984 to teach peace education to Palestinian children who might otherwise turn to violence.

Seventeen-year-old Liat Epstein, who went to the Creativity for Peace Camp for Jewish and Palestinian teenage girls in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Camp was co-founded by a Palestinian and an Israeli woman to nurture the next generation of female leaders and peacemakers. After describing the joys and difficulties of their new friendships, Liat said “We don’t want our kids to grow up with fear as we did. We want to change that. It was hard to go back home where people didn’t know what we had learned. My class was getting ready to go into the army.”

There were glimpses of visible transformation:

We were all charmed by the brilliant and charismatic Dr. Ali Qleibo, a Palestinian cultural anthropologist, artist, and author. We listened to Ali’s story of the Palestinians with great empathy, but our skills were tested when Ali expressed his feelings about Jews: “There has been no ‘good goy’ among the Jews for the Arabs, the way there

was for the Jews in Germany. No Jew has helped us. We don’t want to live with them. The War of 1948 was a massacre. They should have known better just coming out of Germany. In the Old

Testament, the Jews always had to demonize the Other. Always the Other is the enemy.” The Jews in particular in our group were visibly disturbed. A few of us felt guilty, one apologized profoundly. Several others shared their own pain with Dr. Qleibo afterwards. They were really upset that a reputable university professor and cultural anthropologist would be teaching what they viewed as racism.

And how did Ali respond to our feedback? He said he had never met a group like ours, or Jews like us. We had heard his pain and now he had heard ours. Next day, Ali followed our tour bus to Bethlehem, and later brought his mother and young

daughter to meet us. According to Leah, “Shift comes when we can acknowledge each other’s suffering. We were present with him and connected at that heart level, even after he said those painful things about Jews. That was the cause of the magical shift. It wasn’t the arguing or debating—the head stuff. It was the heart stuff.”

Efrat Badihi is a settler in the Golan Heights, which she fights to keep from being returned to Syria. Efrat is an 8th generation Sabra who left her family and risked her life to fight for the Jewish settlers who were being expelled from Gaza. She chained herself to the fence. We were all moved, often crying with her, as she shared her ardent love of the land and her life of sacrifice for her children and grandchildren. When she had finished speaking, it was our turn. Michael thanked her for her openness, then softly and gently asked whether she could put herself—for even a minute—in the shoes of a Palestinian grandmother who had the same feelings for her grandchildren as Efrat herself. Efrat was silent for a few moments. Her eyes filled with tears again as she said quietly, “Maybe the Palestinians are suffering more now. As mother to mother, I don’t know. But I just wish they would stop fighting. To be honest, it is hard to put myself in the shoes of a Palestinian mother. I’ll have to think about that.”

It was a small but very dramatic moment for all of us—for Efrat, and we who listened and embraced her from our hearts.

Everyone went home with something different;



Photo: Michael Klein

Ester Golan, a child Holocaust survivor who has dedicated herself to reconciliation work between Germans and Jews.

continued on page 38

HEART...

Continued from page 10

I can only speak for myself. My hitherto theoretical support and sympathy for the Palestinian "cause" was fleshed out with huge respect and affection for the patience, resourcefulness, and generosity of spirit of the Palestinians we met, who struggle under the enormous daily challenges of the Occupation. I felt more anger toward the Israelis, my fellow Jews, for their inhumane treatment of the Palestinians. At the same time, I gained an increased understanding of their fear, and therefore more compassion and hopefulness about their ability to move beyond that fear, as indeed many have. It is important for both peoples when internationals like us can witness their pain and fear.

I hear skepticism from readers who dismiss all this touchy-feely stuff; it is too sentimental, emotion-based, or simplistic. Surely the situation is so urgent, the power so imbalanced between Occupied and Occupier, that it demands more hardcore direct political action than simply talking and listening.

I don't believe it is either/or, but rather both/and. Compassionate Listening does not preclude direct political action. Indeed we need to influence the political situation as urgently as possible, and there are many strategies to do so. But no political solution will be accomplished or sustainable unless we open minds and hearts, which have so hardened on both sides, and establish an informed and compassionate base on the ground. Our biggest under-utilized power as peacemakers is our hearts. CL is learning how to embody that power in the most challenging situations we face, from our daily lives to international conflict, connecting with whoever that "other" is, whether a ter-

rorist or a mother-in-law. We can each choose the approach which suits our temperament and skills, but it is increasingly important to put ourselves in the picture. We in the Diaspora cannot be mere onlookers. As long as the State of Israel is conflated with "Jewish," all Jews have a right as well as an obligation to act for what we see as Jewish values, which include universal human rights and dignity. Our only security, for Israel and for Jews, lies not in Walls but Bridges. ♦

For more information about the many projects and locations of The Compassionate Listening Project, books and videos, see www.compassionatelisting.org

For a video of the presentation of our delegation, with first-person readings of the stories with slides, please see:
<http://www.workingtv.com/compassionate-listening.html>

Libby and Len Traubman, <http://traubman.igc.org>, are long-time organizers of living-room dialogue. Get on their list to receive e-mails of progressive peace-making initiatives around the world. Google "Jewish Palestinian Success."

http://allmep.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=4. The Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) is a consortium of NGOs that work for people-to-people coexistence and cooperative activities on the ground.

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