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Talk is silver

Israeli-Palestinian dialogue projects are, mostly internationally, seen as a way to resolve the conflict between both parties. The idea is that if people talk, they will grow to understand each other and stop fighting. In Palestinian society, this form of “reconciliation” effort is ill-reputed and mostly seen as serving the Israeli occupier or the foreign donor.

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In the early eighties, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher advised black and white South Africans to use “Constructive Engagement” to end the Apartheid regime – to use incentives rather than sanctions and divestment. The anti-Apartheid movement rejected Thatcher’s advice and continued to use diverse forms of resistance, a strategy that was ultimately rewarded by the collapse of Apartheid and the ruling colonialist regime.

By the early nineties, the call for dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis had come into vogue. During the Oslo years, most foreign donors encouraged joint projects between both. These projects took all forms, from dialogue groups to economic ventures.

The international mood was optimistic; the world acted as though the main problem had been solved and all the conflict needed for total resolution was a bit of ice-breaking. All the while, the most essential questions went unasked: Is the conflict the result of a misunderstanding between two parties? Can the occupier and the occupied engage positively in dialogue while the Caterpillar military bulldozers work nonstop to demolish houses, uproot trees, confiscate land, block roads, and injure and kill those who get in the way? Why do international donor organizations persist in ignoring the facts on ground? Why do people engage in their dialogue programs when they haven’t brought about any positive change in the past 25 years?

And above all: Can serious dialogue take place before the occupation has truly ended?

Let Us Share and Alleviate Hard Feelings

In the late nineties, the organization I worked for at the time ordered me to attend a workshop in West Jerusalem where women from war zones would meet and share. The workshop included women from South Africa, Ireland, Bosnia, Rwanda, Palestine and Israel. The women spent two days together exchanging life stories, and the stories would be filmed.

My first remark was that all the women belonged at the workshop except the Israelis. All but the Israelis were part of oppressed groups, while they were part of an oppressor group. How could I share my life on equal ground with Israeli women who lived in my grandparents’ homes on streets that I wasn’t allowed to set foot on?

Nevertheless, I agreed to participate in this strange undertaking. An Israeli intellectual, the director of the institute, was facilitating this round table of shared pain and agony.

When it was the Israeli women’s turn, one spoke of her experience of the Holocaust in Poland. She was in her early sixties and referred to events that had occurred when she was younger than four. The story was painful and horrifying; we all were in tears. Her story about her grandparents who were brutally butchered reminded me of my grandparents, who were killed in the Jordan River in 1967 while trying to return home, and when she finished speaking, I raised my hand to share. But as soon as I began saying that her story brought up my own memories, the Israeli facilitator stopped me.

“It’s not your turn. Anyway, you cannot compare anything to the Holocaust.”

“But aren’t we here to share, to compare and reflect to one another?” I asked.

“We’re here to share but not to compare things.”

“But her grandparents were killed trying to escape the ghetto, and mine were killed trying to escape their imposed and sudden exile,” I tried to clarify.

“There’s no comparison,” she replied. “You need to be more sensitive towards the most tragic and horrifying human experience.”

I was speechless. When my turn came, I was told I could not speak about my grandparents killing, my father’s torture in jail, or even my sister’s suffering in the Israeli hospital; I could speak only of my own personal experience. And I couldn’t speak of the pain of my parent’s absence in prison and the hospital as a result of

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Israeli war crimes. I was only allowed to speak about my experience as an oppressed woman living in a masculine-ruled community.

I spoke of these things, but insisted in my ending remarks that “my story has not finished yet. I still suffer on daily basis under harsh Israeli colonial and discriminatory policies. Your story happened in the past; mine is ongoing. I’m still in the very heart of the nightmare.”

The Israeli women almost jumped at my neck, claiming they experienced more suffering than I could comprehend in their fear of terrorist attacks, and in “not feeling free” to move around their country “due to the unfriendly attitudes of the Arab population.”

Later, a tour of Jerusalem was organized. However, the foreign visitors were taken only to see West Jerusalem, “as the East side [which is Palestinian] might not be safe.” We were told that Jerusalem had been a dry neglected desert before the Jews came to make it bloom. “Look from your windows, you can see how multi-cultural and welcoming the city of *Yerushalayim* [the Hebrew name for Jerusalem] is.” What they didn’t mention was that were it not for this workshop, I would never have been permitted to set foot here, as two-day permissions for Palestinians, issued by Israel, to stay in any part of Jerusalem, East or West, were nearly impossible to come by.

I returned home with very heavy heart. I had been put on an equalizing platform with my oppressor. Truly, their history of victimization contrasted heavily with their current reality, now that they had finally “managed to reach homeland” – at the expense of a whole population. But they were permitted to speak of the past, while I and my Palestinian colleagues were not allowed to talk about our experience of diaspora and our nostalgia for our parents’ homes and land. We were told to leave the past behind and to focus on the future, on reconciliation with the new neighbor, who in truth was a settler. Referring repeatedly to Jewish history and suffering was presented as just and fair, while discussing the past and present of Palestinian pain was seen as exaggeration or out of context. I was labeled a provocative, trouble-seeking participant who had come not to share but to criticize and complain.

But in the end another professionally-written, attractively formatted report was generated documenting that women in conflict had met, shared, and sympathized with each other and discovered common ground. The report extended recommendations for the sustainability of such “qualitative” programs, on the short and long run.

Reconciliation Discourse: Fantasy vs. reality

In theory, breaking down the wall between oneself and the “Other” toward reconciliation should be seen as a positive step, along with putting aside the harsh realities of daily life under occupation, to open the mind and heart to “objective” dialogue with the occupier. But can this actually happen? Can it be fair and rewarding?

In most of human history, attempts for understanding and reconciliation between the occupier and the occupied have taken place only after the end of occupation or colonization, when the parties stood on equal or near-equal ground. The sword is off the back,

the leash is off the neck, and people can begin to approach one another.

It is nearly impossible to bridge trust between unequal parties *even after independence* with the imperialist machinery continuing in full speed. How absurd is it then to talk of “reconciliation” while the occupation, with all its’ oppressive measures, is still in effect. In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said wrote that, “exactly as in its triumphant period imperialism tended to license only a cultural discourse that was formulated from within it. Today post-imperialism has permitted mainly a cultural discourse of suspicion on the part of formerly colonized peoples and of theoretical avoidance at most on the part of metropolitan intellectuals.”ⁱ

It is important within this context, to keep in mind that Oslo was not meant to end the occupation. There was no Israeli acknowledgment of moral responsibility for its dispossession of the Palestinians, confiscation of their lands, brutal treatment of their people, and systematic destruction of their society. Seventeen years after Oslo was signed, the situation of the Palestinians is harsher than ever. The occupation is further entrenched into Palestinian society, while the advent of the wall, the ever-increasing restrictions on movement, and billions of dollars of aid from the US and the EU have made the occupation more invisible than ever for Israel, whose citizens do not suffer its direct consequences. The possibility of a dignified existence for Palestinians is remote; residents of the Palestinian territories are deeply frustrated and now see Oslo not only as a total failure, but as an ongoing nightmare.

The idea that it’s time to meet and reconcile, the expectation of understanding, tolerance and sharing between colonizer and colonized, is nothing but fantasy. There is no conflict between two equal parties, each not acknowledging the rights of the other; the very word “conflict” is clouding the asymmetry.

In the opinion of many Palestinians there is no question about the injustice of the occupation. “The presumption that dialogue is needed in order to achieve peace completely ignores the historical context of the situation in Palestine”, writes Faris Giacaman. “It assumes that both sides have committed, more or less, an equal amount of atrocities against one another, and are equally culpable for the wrongs that have been done. It is assumed that not one side is either completely right or completely wrong, but that both sides have legitimate claims that should be addressed, and certain blind spots that must be overcome. Therefore, both sides must listen to the ‘other’ point of view, in order to foster understanding and communication, which would presumably lead to ‘coexistence’ or ‘reconciliation’.”ⁱⁱ

“A good chance to travel”

According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “between 1993 and 2000 (alone), Western governments and foundations spent between 20\$ million and 25\$ million on the dialogue groups. A subsequent wide-scale survey of Palestinians who participated in the dialogue groups revealed that this great expenditure “failed to produce a single peace activist on either side.”ⁱⁱⁱ

A research study for “the exchange and reunion of Palestinian-Israeli youth aiming to urge the peace process through dialogue and accord,” by Palestinian Vision in Ramallah 2008,^{iv} has also revealed much of the absurdity

of such programs. The study, which collected data from 289 young Palestinians who had taken part in dialogue programs, aimed to measure the outcome of these in terms of buttressing peace culture in both parties.

Only 16 study participants said that these programs “might enhance peace culture and good dialogue amongst the participants,” while 120 said that “only the other party benefited, by appearing as peace lovers.” 220 participants stated that “it was a good chance to travel and enjoy a new place”, while only 33 answered: “I now have new human perspective and maybe something mutual with the other party.” Most significantly, 119 participants said that they haven’t changed their opinions of the other party and that they were “more convinced now that they are only enemies.” 40 responded that they “realized that they have people that like peace. But 26 said that they hated “them now more than ever before” and 64 were “more convinced that peace is difficult and almost impossible.”

The research included 32 NGO workers who took part in organizing the programs. In a question about the purposes behind the rise of such programs, 28 believed it was all about donors’ interests and fundraising (much easier to acquire big funding amount if engaged with such programs), while only 4 believed that the programs “came out of a need for such meetings.” 25 workers believed there was no effect and no achievement; only 7 thought there was some effect and some “better” understanding.

Bashir Barghouthi, the main author of the research, said that all study participants refused to declare their names. When asked why, they stated that they did not feel comfortable about their participation and that they “wouldn’t get involved again.”

One possible claim is that this comes from fear of the local community. However, no one has been attacked or even directly threatened for participating in dialogue groups. According to Barghouthi, people who take part in dialogue groups feel ashamed and in one way or another feel the programs are the result of either financial interests and “good” international relations of those NGO heads, and that their participation was driven principally by a desire to travel and escape the big cage of occupation, as acquiring a visa to the west is extremely challenging without assistance from a donor or an Israeli organization.

Barghouthi also says that such programs have deteriorated over the past few years, compared to their momentum immediately following the Oslo Accords. “It was basically about putting a stop to the resistance and taming the youth. And when the violence ended, the need for such programs shrunk. The majority of dialogue programs questions the benefits of “violence”, but don’t do the same with the very root of violence, which is the occupation and oppression of the occupied.” Barghouthi claims that the programs are “mainly tailored and designed to enhance temporary pacification amongst the new Palestinian generation, or even to create a state of passivity.” It is thus worthwhile to draw attention to the very limited number of such dialogue meetings that have taken place inside the occupied Palestinian territory, while hundreds have taken place abroad, mainly in Europe and the US, as well as in Israel.

If the “enhancement of peace” is truly a program goal, then why shouldn’t ALL of them take place in the occupied lands, where Israeli youth can be exposed to

the heavy, aggressive and inhuman reality of occupation? Only then might they have the chance to realize that they are not meeting with Palestinian youngsters on equal footing.

The few meetings that do take place in the occupied Palestinian territory last only a short time and never include overnight stays. One of these meetings included a group of 45 young women from a bible and Talmud immersion program that also “allowed them to get acquainted with the Palestinian point of view toward the Middle East conflict.” The program’s initiator and director Irwin J. Yitzchak said that “we do not tell them what political views to have. He asserts that the program’s main funder – the California-based Israel advocacy group *Stand with Us* – gave him complete academic freedom, although his approach initially raised eyebrows. His goal, he explains, “is to create sophisticated spokespeople for Israel, advocates who know how to respond to critics.”^v

So the colonialist would benefit by learning how the other thinks, what their claims are to the international community, and how to respond to critics. With growing international resentment of Israeli aggression against the Palestinians, such attempts might be worthy.

While it is always advantageous for the occupier to learn first-hand about the culture of the occupied, it was perhaps more important for Yitzchak to send a message to the international community that “we are seeking peace and extending our hands while the other party is not serious about bringing peace to the area.”

The Lie of the “Middle East Conflict”

The “Middle East conflict” is a deceptive term; the reality of Palestine/Israel is one of colonialism, racism, apartheid, a situation of oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized.

“In cases of colonialism and apartheid, history shows that colonial regimes do not relinquish power without popular struggle and resistance, or direct international pressure”, writes Faris Giacaman. “It is particularly naïve to assume that persuasion and talking will convince an oppressive system to give up its power.”^{vi}

The fantasy of getting both sides heard, of each recognizing the other’s humanity, is not only fruitless but delusional and in fact paves the way for injustice to be institutionalized. The insistence on using the term “conflict” indicates denial of reality and keeps long-lasting peace at a distance.

In *Power, Politics and Culture*, Edward Said wrote that, “until the time comes when Israel assumes moral responsibility for what it has done to the Palestinian people, there can be no end to conflict. [...] What is needed, at the very least, is an acknowledgment of the destruction of Palestinian society, of the dispossession of the Palestinian people and the confiscation of their lands. [...] The conflict can only end when Israel assumes the burden of all that. I think an attempt should be made to say: this is what happened. This is the narrative. [...] No one gets absolute justice, but there are steps that must be taken, like the ones taken at the end of apartheid. [...] The only way to deal with a complex history of antagonism based on ethnicity is to look at it, understand it, and then move on.”^{vii}

The International Donor Community: Clearing the conscience

Tens of millions of dollars have been spent over the past 20 years by the donor community on dialogue, reconciliation and peace-building programs, with very questionable results.

Palestinians meet with Israelis to convince them that they are no less human, that they have simply had the misfortune to be born on disputed land as had their predecessors for thousands of years and that they can't "peacefully" pack up and leave simply because the need for a "pure" Jewish state has emerged.

I haven't heard of another example in history where the occupied has been asked to dialogue regularly and informally with the occupier to ask for the right to exist. And it cannot be claimed that the dialogue programs have resulted in the Israeli occupier feeling guilty or inspired it to act mercifully toward the oppressed.

The donor community, comprised principally of the US and the EU, proposed to donate money after Oslo was signed to work for lasting peace and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. A fever of common Palestinian-Israeli projects took over. An obsession of dialogue and reconciliation programs took hold. Local organizations that included related projects received more money; organizations that did not, not only experienced a drop in funding, but were threatened with being labeled anti-peace or even terrorists.

But all the millions spent have seen resentment and hatred grow on both sides. A quick review of polls, studies, and elections carried out on both sides back this trend. So why do the international donors insist on this path? Why the refusal to acknowledge the unequal standing of the parties? Why the wasteful use of taxpayer's money?

There are only two logical answers. Either, the donors themselves do not acknowledge the occupation as unjust, preferring to rest on the terminology of conflict (of equal parties) and clash of civilizations. Or, dialogue, reconciliation and negotiation projects are a way of pretending to work on the problem, clearing their conscience and their public standing while maintaining the status quo.

This way, the entire colonialist apparatus is rebranded as a misunderstanding, its solution being for people to get to know one another. This attitude is at the heart of modern racism, by which the oppressed must justify their very humanity and right to exist.

The calls for open-mindedness and peace-seeking continue. It is a road Palestinians have proved willing to try. But their desire to talk about the past isn't welcomed. Palestinians are told they need to move forward. According to Bashir Barghouthi, "talking about '48 [the war of 1948 that established the Israeli state through the dispossession of the Palestinians] is never welcomed," as though it is a long gone chapter of history that needs to be sealed for good. It is preferred to talk about our

mutual and common concerns as humans, rather, than to bring the conflict back to the table."

Conclusion

When it comes to colonialism, oppression and apartheid, there is no such thing as balance. The oppressor group will not give up its privilege without pressure. The dilemma is not a question of misunderstanding or a clash of civilizations.

Western countries have contributed systematically to the Palestinian tragedy, and international law holds them accountable for a real and just solution. All the nicely presented reports of superficial projects filling the shelves of donor organizations cannot relieve their conscience. What we need is not temporary pacification, but genuine justice.

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ⁱ Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, June 1994, p. 194.

ⁱⁱ "Can we talk? The Middle East "peace industry", Faris Giacaman, *The Electronic Intifada*, 20 August 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ San Francisco Chronicle, 19 October 2008.

^{iv} www.palvision.ps

^v *Haaretz*, 2 July 2010, p. A5

^{vi} Giacaman, Faris, *The Electronic Intifada*, 20 August 2009.

^{vii} Said Edward. *Power, Politics and Culture*. NY: Vintage, 2001. p. 449.

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