

Commitment to Coexistence: Steps toward reconciliation within and between Israeli and Palestinian societies^I

Rachel Brandenburg

UNTIL RECENTLY, many groups in Israel conducted conflict resolution skill-building programs, coexistence building exercises, various forms of Arab-Jewish dialogue, and other similar initiatives aimed at furthering Israeli-Palestinian understanding and reconciliation. However, as the *intifada* ensued, traffic between Israeli and Palestinian territory has come to a near halt and the two sides have become increasingly polarized. As a result, many of these initiatives have been forced to cease operations, while others have had to reshape their programming and shift their target populations, often to include only Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel. Nonetheless, these few organizations have been able to continue affecting people in positive ways.

During the summer of 2003, I spent three months in Israel exploring some of these initiatives and speaking with people involved as part of a larger project examining those Israeli-Palestinian coexistence-building initiatives that have been able to sustain their activities despite the challenges posed by the *intifada*.^{II}

A handful of Israelis, Palestinians, and others have demonstrated a true commitment to creating forums for dialogue and grounds for coexistence between the inhabitants of Israel and the Palestinian territories. This work is that much more crucial now due to the heightened sense of urgency of the current situation. While little or no progress may be seen between people on the governmental level, individuals are working hard to ensure that positive interpersonal relationships continue to be created and maintained between individual Israelis and Palestinians. It is these relationships that will serve

^I I would like to thank Benjamin Pogrund, Rabbi Mickey Rosen, and Walid Salem for taking the time to speak with me about their involvement with coexistence building initiatives.

^{II} The complete project, *Across the Divide: An exploration of Israeli-Palestinian coexistence initiatives*, can be found at www.tuftsgloballeadership.org/NIMEP.

as a foundation for further reconciliation and coexistence when a political resolution is achieved.

The following are profiles of two individuals, Benjamin Pogrund and Rabbi Mickey Rosen, who exemplify incredible commitment to reconciliation; among Jews, between Arabs and Jews, and between the political and religious divide in Israel. A third piece follows, offering the perspective of an equally committed individual, Walid Salem, who dedicates himself to promoting values of democracy and coexistence among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

BENJAMIN POGRUND

Benjamin Pogrund is the director of the Yakar Center for Social Concern in Jerusalem, Israel. The Yakar Center is a secular organization housed at the Orthodox Jewish Yakar Synagogue in West Jerusalem, an amalgam of secular politics and religious institutions truly unique in Israeli society. The Center's guiding principle is that a secure future for Israel depends on increasing contact and creating trust between people—Jews and Jews, Jews and Muslims, Jews and Christians, and between Jewish-Israelis, Arab-Israelis, and Palestinians. The Center strives to bring together people of different views and backgrounds for private and public discussions. Programs sponsored by Yakar in the past have addressed issues such as Arabs living in Israel, women's rights in Israel, the possibility for a shared vision for peace, teaching non-violence in Palestinian schools, prospects for democracy in Israel and a future Palestinian state, Jewish-Muslim dialogue, and Jewish values in a modern society, among others.

I visited Yakar in August 2003 to interview Benjamin Pogrund. Pogrund came to Israel in 1995, having lived in London and been raised in and spent much of his adult life in South Africa. His attachment to Israel and experience with conflict began at a young age in South Africa, where he spent his youth active in Habonim Dror¹¹ and dreamt of moving to Israel after high school to become an “intellectual peasant on a kibbutz.” When Pogrund's mother told him at age 16 that he must first find a career, he went to university and got involved with South African student political groups. This was the beginning of many more years of working “across the divide” in South Africa, where Pogrund later worked as the deputy editor of *The Rand*

¹¹ Founded in 1935, Habonim Dror is a progressive Labor Zionist youth movement whose mission is to forge bonds between North American Jewish youth and the State of Israel and to nurture Jewish leaders who will work for the principles of social justice, equality, peace and coexistence in Israel and North America.

Daily Mail and pioneered the reporting of black politics. “We changed the nature of journalism in South Africa. The paper [*The Daily Mail*] was later closed down because our owners were under pressure from the government, but this type of attitude is very much the type of attitude that I come with,” said Pogrund. In London, Pogrund was unable to resurrect the thrill he felt as a journalist in South Africa. “I stumbled across this organization, Yakar, run by this Rabbi, Mickey Rosen. So I started going to meetings, and then I went to the States to write a book and Mickey went to Israel, and he asked me to come with him on *aliyah*^{IV} to start the same thing [Yakar] on a big scale.”

Yakar has witnessed religious coexistence, if only on a small scale. According to Pogrund:

When I go to Palestinians and say that I come from an orthodox organization, their eyes go round—there is no orthodox organization that does work with Palestinians, it just doesn’t happen. And we’ve had some wonderful experiences. There was a time when we were doing a Muslim dialogue, and evening came, so the Muslims got down on their knees and did their prayers, in the synagogue. And the Rabbi came in and said, ‘Muslims doing their prayers in a synagogue in Jerusalem—happens all the time!’ It’s an unusual circumstance, but Mickey Rosen is an unusual rabbi. I used to say, if there were a hundred rabbis like Mickey, Israel would be a transformed society. Now I say if there was one other rabbi like Mickey, it would make a huge difference. He has a huge respect for people, for the other.

Pogrund has remained persistent through the difficulties presented by the current political situation and works hard to fix numerous problems facing Israeli society. He is one of the few committed people who is still willing to go up against endless challenges to sustain communication with Palestinian colleagues and to teach others about the values that he holds in high accord.

A lot of the contact [between Palestinians and Israelis] has been suppressed recently. It’s only the really tough, committed people in the peace camp who risk going across. The Israeli government doesn’t allow it, and it’s very dangerous. Last year when we had these meetings of shared history, we couldn’t meet in Israel or Palestinian areas, so we were going to go to Turkey. It was relatively cheap, but more expensive than meeting here, so I had to raise more money. But then it turned out that we couldn’t go

^{IV} The Hebrew term for moving to Israel, literally, “going up.”

to Turkey because one of the Palestinians was Armenian so he wouldn't set foot in Turkey. So we went to Cyprus, which was significantly more expensive and added to our costs. It was more of a trip to get there because the Arabs couldn't get permission to leave through Israel, so they had to go over the mountains through Jordan. It was a bureaucratic nightmare. We had to negotiate through the army and the government for three weeks for one case and six weeks for another case. At five in the afternoon before the meeting, we finally got permission, but it turned out that there was a curfew [on the area where the Palestinian counterpart was coming from], which the army knew, so we couldn't get permission. I couldn't say we were refused permission, but the permission was just impossible to use. These are the games being played and you get nowhere.

We try to work around these roadblocks, but it's hard. People break. We once had a weekend together—about sixteen people in Cyprus. It was very good, with very good discussions. When we went out, when we got to Ben Gurion airport, the moment they discovered we were a group, Israeli-Palestinian, we were taken aside and given a really rigorous security check. As a result of this we were running late. So one of the young women in security takes the whole group of us ahead of the queue. It was a summer's day with long queues, and there we were taken to the top of the queue. People waiting were angry, as you can imagine—they started shouting—pushy Israelis. I was embarrassed as hell. This young woman would just say, 'security,' that was the magic word. And then one woman recognized me, she said, 'Aren't you from Yakar?' I said yes and she asked, 'What's this all about?' so I told her that it was a group of Israelis and Palestinians. Word got around the crowd and attitudes changed immediately. People stopped being angry that we were cutting the queue and started saying, 'It's okay, have a good discussion'.

When we were going back to Israel, the chief security guard asked who's in charge—I was. The guard was South African. He said, 'You're related to Hyme?' I say yes, he's my cousin. He said, 'Ah, he operated on me!' So I thought, great, he knows me, he knows my cousin, we'll be fine. But we had the worst security of all. One of the Palestinians finally broke under it. He started ranting, really ranting. 'Never ask me to go on El Al again—I'll never do it!' When we got to Tel Aviv, he actually approached me and apologized, said he shouldn't have talked to me like that. But those are some of the situations you have small things like that. You've got to be committed. There are people who do a lot more than I do—slipping across the border, and things like that. People get killed—you read about it. But this is what is important.

While Pogrund does a lot of work focused on the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict, he is acutely aware of and equally concerned with other social problems within Israeli society, especially the division among Jews.

It's one of the gravest aspects of life in Israel. The Palestinian problem will be solved, sooner or later. It's going to be solved because it's got to be solved. The division among Jews, however, could blow this place apart. It's very worrying. We've got to do more work. We've got to act as some kind of a bridge. These days I think there is a little bit more of a consciousness among Israelis that this is a very dangerous chasm. I think Sharon has probably done a lot. He's been cutting down on *yeshivot*^V, etcetera with the budget so I think some *charedim*^{VI} are suddenly waking up to the fact that if they're not in government, they'll lose a lot of their power base in this country. It would be a healthy thing for the *charedim* to realize that they have to work with other segments of society. They can't just stand there. I think we can play some kind of a role in helping to cross this divide. I think one has to work at it and it's a good time to work at it because of the economic situation. I just don't have the time. I need somebody to do it for me. The vast social problems that have developed here worry me, but one person in a modest organization can only do so much.

One of the things I do a lot is newspaper advertising, in not just *The Jerusalem Post*, but also *Haaretz* and the Hebrew press. By the mere fact that I run an advertisement that says that Walid Salem is coming to speak at Yakar, which is an orthodox organization, about whether a Palestinian state will be democratic, I am helping to make normal what most people view as abnormal. And that to me is important, and we do that all the time. As a journalist, I spent my life in terms of headlines and circulation. There were issues that I tackled in South Africa. When I was an executive—I was a chief editorial writer, I had a certain amount of influence on the society. I can look back at my newspaper and know that we played a crucial, role in shaping today's society. We kept alive the basic human values in the dark years of apartheid.

It's very weary just plugging away, but there are some darned people on both sides, despite all the muck and distrust, and that's the exhilarating thing about being here, that there are certain people who are motivated. This one friend of mine, Walid Salem, I think he's just extraordinary. He spends his days running around the West Bank running seminars for kids and adults on democracy and good governance. Now did you know that goes on in the Palestinian areas? Walid is doing it every day of his life.

^V An academy or secondary school for the study of primarily Jewish texts

^{VI} A sect of Orthodox Chasidic Judaism

It's hardly known, but he's doing it. That really inspires me, to be dealing with people like that.

RABBI MICKEY ROSEN

Rabbi Mickey Rosen, the Rabbi of Yakar Synagogue, comes from a family of respected Jewish educators. His father, the late Kopul Rosen, was a very famous British rabbi who was very involved in Jewish education. His youngest brother, David Rosen, formerly worked for the Anti-Defamation League in Israel and now works as an International Ambassador for the American Jewish Committee. The eldest brother, Jeremy Rosen, runs Yakar in London. "They come from quite an extraordinary family," said Pogrud.

According to Rabbi Rosen, Yakar is a congregation unlike other congregations.

It's not a homogeneous group of people economically, geographically, politically, or religiously. It's a wonderful mix of individuals. On a Friday night, half of the Hebrew University is here, and with them anybody who has made a trip east to discover anything. One could say half the community is here in spite of the *drasha*—the sermon on Friday night—and some are there because of the sermon, in spite of the music. I think there would be a group of people who would prefer that I didn't talk about some of the social issues that I address in my talks, but I think there's another group who realize these are important subjects to be discussed. When it comes to political issues—I mean issues that engage the present reality between Israelis and Palestinians—I try to be an educationalist, not a politician. I think politics is the art of answers, and education is a way of thinking by which people can come to different answers.

Rabbi Rosen, a quiet, soft-spoken man, offers a unique perspective on the contemporary interplay between Judaism and modernity.

I think there's been a process, maybe for at least a century, where Judaism, like Christianity, has tended to withdraw from urban society because it simply can't deal with problems of modernity. So that now religion, Judaism included, focuses primarily on ritual practice. You add an ingredient, religious Zionism in this country, that in the last 35 to 36 years, has veered radically to the political right because it has decided that land is the dominant value, and this adds up to a sum where religion in Israel has more or less retired from social issues. There has been a contraction of what religion is, unless you believe in its relation to land. There is only minimal

halachic^{vii} discussion of moral, social, or ethical issues. The responsibility for this must fall on the rabbinic leadership of the Jewish world, which is narrow and often chauvinistic. Maybe there is another aspect, that the world in general has adopted social issues and rejected religious spiritual issues, so the Jewish world distances itself from the issues as well.

Here there is also the problem between the religious and secular world, that one will say the opposite of the other regardless of what they are saying. If the left wing secular parties were to pose the idea of a shelter for battered women, because the secular parties put it forward, the religious parties would not support it. Religious identity in this country is usually meant to mean, “I know who I am, and therefore I am not you.” Rather than, “I know who I am, so therefore I have the confidence to meet you, to know you and to engage you.” I imagine this is the consequence of always living with a mental threat that the world is against me. There used to be a time when Judaism was challenged by other “isms,” but now the challenge is hedonism—just wanting to have a good life. The world therefore is receptive to an integrated religious approach to the world, but we’re too frightened to convey that message. I don’t see identity as a reason to be divided from the other, as much as the strength to be engaged with, but many people do.

I think it’s perfectly justified to have a pragmatic position and question, do I trust the other side? Is there apt security, etc.? But that’s a pragmatic, not a religious, ideological position, and the leadership in this region seems to be guided more by ideology than by pragmatism.

Maybe the best thing you could do would be to create coffee shops where the coffee is free, on the condition that you sit down with somebody you don’t know and who you wouldn’t ordinarily sit down with. It’s not just Israel-Palestine specific, but it’s a wider issue of living in bubbles. It affects the secular world just as much as the religious world. If you feel safe, you’re less threatened. So the question then is how do you break down bubbles? The intolerance is not in any one camp, it’s a problem that’s part of being neurotic. I think it was Ruth Chalderson who once said, ‘If you can sit down with Hamas, why can’t you sit down with Chabad?’ It makes no sense whatsoever.

^{vii} Accepted code of Jewish law

I met with Walid Salem, director of the Panorama Center, at the American Colony Hotel on the border between East and West Jerusalem. A beautiful, old compound built by an Ottoman pasha, it is considered an accessible, neutral meeting ground where many journalists meet their interviewees and diplomats meet each other. During our conversation he told me about his work with Panorama, specifically focusing on the work between Israelis and Palestinians.

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Founded in 1991, the Panorama Center is a center devoted to “raising public awareness on issues related to civil society in Palestine.” Organized by Palestinians for Palestinians, it has offices in Jerusalem, Ramallah, and the Gaza Strip, with plans to open an additional office in Hebron. Panorama’s mission is to actively participate in the development of Palestinian society by disseminating norms of citizenship, accountability,

and good governance to multiple facets of the society. Panorama works to help the Palestinians build a civil, democratic, and pluralistic society; it assists in cultural projects, the advancement of women’s rights, and general community development. It targets all sectors of society, especially focusing on municipalities, ministries and government institutions, student unions, NGOs, and cultural, youth, and women’s centers. Panorama’s main functional units include youth development, democracy and civil education, community development, research and training. According to Salem:

For Panorama, Israeli-Palestinian projects are a topic in itself. We began discovering the need for such projects through democracy education. We found that when we talk about tolerance and other democratic values—justice, freedom—we began to be confronted with the idea that tolerance first needs to be developed between Israelis and Palestinians, and then between the other. We then got involved in two types of projects. One was working on second track negotiations with various parties and in various contexts. The second was a series of Israeli-Palestinian joint projects.

^{VIII} From an interview in August 2003. All information is accurate as of then.

The first project was a shared history project with Benjamin Pogrud at Yakar and the Truman Institute [at Hebrew University]. We brought academic historians to Tzfat and compiled fourteen papers written by each historian about the history of the land before 1948. The papers were published in a magazine at the time and are now being prepared for publication in a book. The second was a project with the Truman Institute and American University (AU) in Washington, D.C., “Amalgamating Human Rights and the Peace Process.” Coordinated by Dr. Mohammed Abu-Neilad, an Israeli-Palestinian who teaches at AU, the project brought Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations together for a two week training conference on human rights in D.C. The dialogue continued when we returned to Israel.

We started a third project with Peace Now, “The Peace and Justice Project.” Several activities were held last June, including a candle lighting with victims of violence and a peaceful demonstration at the Jaffa gate with Palestinians and Israelis. We had dialogue meetings, press conferences, and house meetings where Israelis and Palestinians met in each other’s houses.

WITH WHOM DO YOU TYPICALLY WORK?

We work with the Palestinian people. We are a young people. Sixty-six percent of the population is under 25 years old, and 80% is less than 33 years old. There is a lot of youth, so we do many programs for youth, but not exclusively for youth. A problem is that our participants end up being mostly the converted people, in addition to youth who we sometimes try to bring to these activities. On both sides, we need to attract a new group to come to participate in these activities.

One of the tools in this regard might be something we already are working on, that we go as Palestinians to address Israelis inside Israel, not only in houses, but also on the premises of political parties. I did something like this. The first time I was confronted by a settler was when I was at Yakar. He said, ‘I am a settler of Hebron and I want to ask you a question.’ This was good, to be looking at him in the face rather than thinking he hates me and I hate him. This is why we need to have people talk to each other. A second tool might be video. Israelis can’t now go to the West Bank, so it would be good to have some sort of video-conference to talk to each other. Thirdly, the media can address both societies, in addition to advertising to each side - not a lot of Israelis know about what the Palestinian peace camps are doing, and vice versa. So media coverage in Hebrew and Arabic and in lots of different papers is important.

HOW DO PALESTINIANS RESPOND TO YOUR PROGRAMS?

In different ways. Hamas and Islamic Jihad are completely against any cooperation with Israelis. Some people with Fatah are supporting joint activities with Israelis, and some are not. Some are against because they don't believe in such meetings, and others have been frustrated with

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previous meetings so are no longer interested. They said they were interested before Camp David, but at the collapse of Camp David, they were disappointed when Arafat was under siege and we didn't hear any solidarity from our Israeli friends. When it comes to the left wing organizations, PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) is completely against working with Israelis, DFLP (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine) says that they are against working with Israeli Zionist groups, but are ready to work with

Israeli anti-Zionist groups. The difference between PFLP and DFLP is that both want to work with anti-Zionist groups, but some people in DFLP agree to work with some Israelis who accept two-state solution and accept Jerusalem and a Palestinian capital, and accept refugee issues. For the People's Party, the ex-communist party, they accept working with Israeli groups who support a two-state solution, Jerusalem as capital for two states, and the right of return to Palestinian refugees.

As for civil society, even when official bodies of the NGOs are against any kind of relations with Israelis officially, when you come to details, a lot of organizations themselves have relations with Israeli organizations unofficially on an individual basis. Official bodies of universities, for example, are against this, but a lot of individual academics have relations with each other.

It's not a secret that before the *intifada*, around 150,000 people were working in Israel. They need to work in Israel, and they need to create

economic ties with Israel. The problem comes with the political and civil societies. The people accept the cooperation—most of the polls say that 70% of the population agrees to live in a Palestinian state beside Israel in peace. There is a problem with the peace movements that they are not united. They compete with each other, and it is unclear who is working with who and who is doing what. Politically, it is impossible to change this and unite them. They will not merge because they disagree with each other. You need to unite people in their peaceful activities, even if not in their thinking. If they all were together in some big activity, even if campaigning for different solutions, it would be good. I have a project now with Dutch activists, to invite all of the Palestinian peace groups and all of the Israeli peace groups to one big conference.

In the last three years [2000-2003], we began focusing on a new agenda. It's not enough to continue educating people about democracy, but we must pressure the political parties to train them and make them support advocacy and lobbying for democracy programs. In order to stop violence, we need to find an alternative for the people to the tension that they feel. I want it to be peaceful messages that they send to the Israelis. You can't address the hearts of the Israelis by using any kind of violence such as stone throwing and then call it non-violence.

I have seen people becoming more supportive of democracy. People have become more and more aware of the dysfunction of the political parties. Regarding democracy, they are still suspicious if they will really be for democratization or not. People who were frustrated after Camp David are now beginning to return to participate because they know very well there is no other alternative. The only way is to work together and try to change the atmosphere together. Only through elections can we change the Israeli government and change Yasser Arafat. So they think that one of the tools to change the Israeli government is to work with and cooperate with the Israelis so they believe them, that they can trust them as partners for peace. Let us believe in each other and have governments who lead us to peace.