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## Doing Pro-Israel Peace Work in the United States

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the effectiveness of the dialogue? That, of course, depends upon how one judges effectiveness, that is, how one defines the purpose of the dialogue. The women on both sides clearly were well aware that they were not the negotiators in the conflict (although in some cases the Palestinian women actually were on the negotiating team of the PLO). On the whole, they also realized that they did not wield the influence that the men did. There was no expectation on their part that they might resolve the conflict by means of their dialogue.

However, there are other purposes to dialogue. Its primary purpose is to dissolve the psychological barriers obstructing resolution of the conflict, by reversing the dehumanization of the enemy that takes place during a prolonged conflict; expanding understanding of the other's positions; creating empathy with the other side; and thus paving the way for eventual reconciliation. Given these objectives, it may be that women's dialogue can be considered more effective than mixed dialogue, and ultimately perhaps more important.

These are all observations. A number of factors are deserving of systematic study. It is important to learn more about the effect that women's marginality has on their behavior. Systematic, comparative research should be conducted on the importance of separate women's frameworks for activity. Such frameworks enable women to have a voice, to speak, and to do so largely in a form and manner different from that of men. We need to take the positive aspects of women's dialogue and, perhaps, combine them with men's willingness to tackle the hard issues—though not necessarily in the same way as men tend to do so. More importantly, we have to bring women, preferably those with experience in dialogue, to the negotiating table and provide them with the influence that men have.

#### DOING PRO-ISRAEL PEACE WORK IN THE UNITED STATES\*

*Clare Kinberg, Bridges Journal*

Dedicated to the memory of Rabbi Myron Kinberg (February 16, 1945–April 19, 1996)

I was 13 years old when my brother Myron graduated from college and began his rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College by spending a year—1968—in Israel. I was 18 when he was ordained a Reform rabbi. Those five years of his rabbinic education were my high school years, and for all those years, he and

his Moroccan-Israeli wife included me in their *garin*, a group of rabbinical student families who planned to make *aliyah* together when they graduated. Through all those years and into my first year in college I studied Hebrew and, somewhat vaguely, planned to go with them when they moved to Israel.

Many things intervened over the next thirty years. By the time they made *aliyah* in 1975 I was deeply involved in my own life, and when Myron found it hard to make a niche for himself as a Reform rabbi in Israel and returned with his family to the U.S. two years later, my dream of living in Israel was put to rest. That dream woke up about five years ago when I adopted my first child. I want to raise my children in the best possible environment for an interracial Jewish family, and far and away, it seems to me, that place is Israel.

I don't have illusions about Israel being color blind, and that's not the point anyway. Even if they do not live with it easily, Israelis—far more than Americans—know that Jews come in all colors and from many divergent cultures. My niece and nephew and their two-year-old son (the same age as my youngest) spent last year (2001–2002) in Israel as part of their rabbinic training. Their stories about parenting in Israel confirmed for me that Israel is the place I want to be raising my children. In addition to the culture being extremely “child-centered,” they told me, public spaces are filled with Jewish children of all colors, from all over the world. “There are more than seventy cultural and religious codes and cultures in Israel,” says Bambi Sheleg, the founding editor of the new Israeli journal *Eretz aheret* (A Different Country). “*Eretz aheret* was created,” she says, “because none of the categories that we Israelis once used to describe ourselves have meaning anymore. All Israelis—Jews and non-Jews, secular and religious—have to set out on a trek to discover who we are.” What an opportunity, what a vision! For me, as a committed Reconstructionist Jew, this trek is the journey I want to be on. I want my family to be part of it.

But . . . there is the small matter of not wanting to move my family to a war zone. And so, until Israelis and Palestinians are firmly on a path to co-existence, I have to do what I can from my home in Oregon.

Recently, my colleague, *Nashim* editor Deborah Greniman, wrote to me that those of us in the Diaspora who care about Israel should use the bit of leisure we have by not being in the center of the conflict to think about how to get from the nightmarish current situation to someplace better. As an editor of the Jewish feminist journal *Bridges*, I have many opportunities

to listen and talk to people, and I try to take the time to incorporate into my own views what I hear from others—that is, to think. I enter into this thinking work grounded in and compelled by commitment to help Israel in this time of crisis. It never leaves my consciousness that Jews in Israel are living with, and dying from, daily relentless attack, nor that Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are suffering under brutal and impossibly fruitless military occupation.

As I write this today, I am working on *Bridges'* upcoming issue, devoted to the writings of Israeli women “living in the heart of the conflict/committed to justice and peace.” I deeply believe that Jewish feminist women want to know each other’s doings, to acknowledge and honor each other’s work, and to build off each other’s achievements. But feminist publishing means more than reporting what other feminists are doing. It also incorporates ways of thinking—learned from women’s experiences of being unable to participate in the political world—that ameliorate the conditions and attitudes that keep women and other marginalized people out of political life. Central to this is respect for the small voice, real willingness to make discussions inclusive, and attention to the domestic facts of life. My thinking has already been changed just by putting to together a “Call for Submissions” for this *Bridges* Israeli issue, because as I wrote it I imagined individual Israeli women reading it, and in turn, each of the 30 submissions *Bridges* has received, written in a woman’s personal voice, has changed me.

Though I am a publisher, writer, and editor, I am neither an academic nor a journalist. I’m an activist who needs to be part of organizing efforts for there to be any meaning in the words I send to the printer. Last year I was part of a group that founded Brit Tzedek v’Shalom: Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace. I had been working for several years to find the right vehicle to do the kind of organizing among American Jews that I think must be done. Now, finally, there is an organization of American Jews with very close ties to Israel, whose commitment to Israel’s future as a safe and secure homeland for the flourishing of the Jewish people compels them to stand up and say to our fellow American Jews: The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza must end. But not only that, we also have to say that a pretty specific set of principles for a negotiated settlement had been largely accepted by Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, the European Union, most of the Arab nations, and the international community. And a thin majority of American Jews agree with those principles as well. In fact, a November 2002 survey of

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American Jews revealed that 51.7% supported a solution to the conflict on the basis of the Clinton Proposals that were put forth following the Camp David peace talks in 2000 and formed the basis of the negotiations at Taba in 2001. A bare majority of us agree that the eventual solution should and will be based on two viable independent states, evacuation of most Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel's withdrawal to the 1967 border with adjustments, and a shared capital in Jerusalem.

Recently, I was speaking with some younger activists about the deep divisions within the Jewish community and the difficulty of expressing a "peace with justice" agenda within Jewish settings in the U.S. The experience of younger activists is that the last two years of explosive violence have so terrorized the Jewish community that any expression of sympathy for Palestinian suffering is equated with betrayal. The Jewish community has never been so divided, the young activists told me. My perspective is a bit different.

In the early 1980s in St. Louis, I taught Jewish Sunday school and spent a lot of time in the Jewish community's Federation library and teacher resource center. And there I read the Jewish newspapers during the war in Lebanon.

I, and almost every Jew I knew personally, thought Ariel Sharon and the Israeli army had gone too far, had caused more death and destruction than was needed to assure safety on Israel's northern border, had created more enemies of peace than peace. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis agreed, and Peace Now was formed. Yet when the St. Louis Jewish Federation's newspaper interviewed a purportedly random selection of St. Louis Jews about whether it was permissible to express any criticism of Israel's war in Lebanon, the respondents agreed, to a person, that any criticism was out of bounds. This was extremely disconcerting to me. Evidently, the Jews known to the Federation and those I knew were completely separate entities (and I was invisible).

At that point I still had no idea just how hostile these non-intersecting groups of Jews could be, but it did not take long to find out. Around this time, at a public meeting with the Israeli consulate, I asked a question based on my reading of former Jerusalem Deputy Mayor Meron Benvenisti's "five minutes to midnight" thesis, in which he warned of the dire consequences of large scale-Jewish settlement in the West Bank. I asked, "Do you think Jewish settlement in the West Bank might make it harder for Jews and

Palestinians to eventually reach a negotiated agreement?” For this question, I was spat upon and physically chased out of the room.

Now, twenty years later, my question is mundane: Everyone except the extreme minority of ideologically committed settlers agrees that the settlements are a major problem in negotiations. Yet getting to a solution has never seemed more difficult. Jews, whether in the U.S. or in Israel, still rarely even speak across the great divides. So, you could say the Jewish community is more divided now than before: twenty years ago mere mention of ideas such as “two states for two peoples” landed you and branded you outside the community. Today, we are split down the middle and still rarely talking. And meanwhile, the minority of fundamentalists among both Jews and Palestinians are holding our peoples hostage under their murderous sway.

Recently, the Eugene Middle East Peace Group, my local meeting ground for Israelis, Palestinians, Jews, Moslems, and others to join under the banner “We Refuse To Be Enemies,” hosted a town hall meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As intended, the town hall meeting brought to the surface many thoughts and feelings that need to be aired. Specifically, it helped me think about several ways in which constructive understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is lacking and needed in the U.S. anti-war movement, one of whose mantras targets Israel as a principal U.S. ally and recipient of U.S. military aid, setting the movement up to be against Israel and sympathetic to the Palestinians. At the town hall meeting, for instance, one person only had to mention Israel and military aid in the same breath, to get heads all over the room nodding in agreement. I blurted out, “What does that mean to you?” My friend Ellen Rifkin, another member of Brit Tzedek, more courteously raised her hand and pointed out that most of the “military aid” is in the form of procurement from U.S. companies, making military aid to Israel, in the end, primarily U.S. government money that ends up lining the pockets of U.S. arms manufacturers. That is true, but as I sat in that meeting in Eugene, I noted a huge piece missing from most people’s consciousness, namely, acknowledgment that Israel does exist in a hostile neighborhood. With the military capability Israel has, if expansion and conquest were the goal, there would be a lot more expansion and conquest. While most of Israel’s neighbors have pledged to support a two-state solution, their support for Israel’s integrity is contingent upon Israel withdrawing to the 1967 borders, so until at least until that happens, there is a condition of

hostility. Furthermore, a very recent, reliable poll of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza revealed that 18%, nearly 1 in 5 Palestinians under occupation, currently favor continuing violent struggle with the goal of gaining all of the territory of historic Palestine—that is, all of Israel. Our friends in the anti-war movement need to know these things.

The most thoughtful, useful, and provocative question of the evening was presented by Peg Morton, long-time peace activist and member of the (Quaker) Friends Meeting. She explained that the Friends had recently hosted a talk by a minister who spent time as an observer in the West Bank. He reported on the realities of the Palestinian situation—the curfews, the constant presence of tanks, helicopters, and artillery, the home demolitions, the lack of water, electricity, and food, the truly nightmarish reality that Palestinians are currently living. Peg was extremely distressed and concerned when a Jewish friend of hers, upon seeing the flyer for the event, told her that such one-sided presentations fuel anti-Semitism, which is currently on the rise and is connected with one-sided views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Peg's cogent question was, given that Americans don't get a full picture of the devastating conditions of the Palestinian population in the occupied territories, how can these conditions be exposed in a way that does not fuel anti-Semitism? One way, of course, is simultaneously to publicize the actions of thousands of Israelis who protest these conditions, who help rebuild the demolished homes and are working within the Israeli political system to change the government. But, further, our friends in the non-violent peace movement need to acknowledge and discuss the support of the vast majority of Palestinians for using all forms of violence against the Israeli occupation, and that of a large minority to keep up the violence until Israel's existence is brought to an end.

Given the decidedly left-of-center grouping at the town hall meeting, it took some courage, I think, for one Jewish man who'd just returned to the U.S. after spending more than a decade in Israel to stand up and ask the question most on the minds of the vast majority of Jews: Will Palestinians, even after they have their own state, ever accept Israel's existence and stop trying to destroy it? Here, for Jews, is the crux of the matter, where our deepest problems lie.

Mistrust, sometimes founded and sometimes not, and misperception, which is never helpful, are destroying our ability to work for and achieve co-existence. For instance, fully 95% of Arab Americans support Israel's right

to exist as a secure and independent state, yet the vast majority of American Jews believe that most Arab Americans don't support Israel's right to exist. This is a self-defeating misperception. And the mirror image is true as well: 85% of us American Jews support an independent, viable Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel, yet only about half of Arab Americans surveyed believe that most Jews would support the right of Palestinians to an independent state. The same mistrust and misperceptions fuel the conflict in Israel and Palestine. I quoted the statistics on Palestinian support for violent struggle so as to make the point that Israel is not exactly victimizing a passive Palestinian population. But a corollary statistic must be taken to heart by those of us who want justice and peace, namely, that 72% of Palestinians say they would support a stop to all violent struggle if they believed that Israel would ever agree to a Palestinian state with approximately the 1967 borders. However, many of them don't believe that Israel will ever really allow a viable Palestinian state. Because of that deep-seated distrust, the vast majority of Palestinians continue to support violent resistance. What would have happened if Israel had ever stopped expanding Jewish settlement in the West Bank and building the bypass roads?

Israeli attitudes almost exactly mirror those of Palestinians: 19% of Israelis do not want to make any territorial compromise; they want to incorporate the whole of the West Bank and Gaza into Israel. On the other hand, 72% would support a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders if Palestinians would commit themselves to stop using violence, but many of them don't believe the Palestinians will ever do so. What would have happened if Palestinians had shunned the violent tactics?

So what can American Jews do to intervene? First of all, I think we have to be open about our commitments and values. Those of us who can—and according to polls, we are the majority—need to stand up and say out loud so others can hear: I am a supporter of Israel, and I support the right of Palestinians to a state of their own alongside Israel. We American Jews need to acknowledge that the vast majority of Arab Americans support Israel's right to exist in the context of a two-state solution. We need to work with them, and they need to know that we hold many opinions in common.

And perhaps harder for us, we need to acknowledge that a majority of Palestinians in the territories also accept Israel's right to exist alongside an independent and viable state of Palestine.

We need to support Israelis who are maintaining open and active channels



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of communication and support with Palestinians. Many joint organizations do still exist, even in the current environment.

And, more difficult, we need to support Israelis in making the concessions and compromises that will demonstrate their acceptance of the right of Palestinians to their own state.

Finally, American Jews need to stand up in the anti-war movement and let our support for Israel be known. Those who are against Israel are against peace. Only those who support both Israel's and Palestine's rights to national sovereignty can be helpful in the movement to resolve the violent conflict.

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Many of the statistics I quote here are from a survey made by a group called Search for Common Ground. Just the name of the group makes me sigh in relief: Israelis and Palestinians are at war, the loss of human life is devastating, but those of us who want peace must seriously search for common ground, and keep searching, and shout when we've found it.

\* This essay is largely based on an address given at Temple Beth Israel (Reconstructionist) in Eugene, Oregon, on January 24, 2003.

### WHY WON'T THERE BE CIVIL MARRIAGE ANY TIME SOON IN ISRAEL? OR: PERSONAL LAW—THE SILENCED ISSUE OF THE ISRAELI- PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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I would like to argue that personal law—the body of law concerned with marriage, divorce, and personal status—is a silenced issue in Israel, precisely because of its centrality to the historical continuity that undergirds the collective memories of the two national groups, Jewish and Arab, that comprise Israel's population. Thus, in a situation of conflict, neither group wants a change in the existing state of affairs. Personal law is “nationalized”; that is, it is conscripted in the service of the national cause.

In the first portion of this essay, I shall bring examples of some things that we have come to take for granted in day-to-day practice in Israeli society, which typify the silencing of the issue of personal law in public discourse. In