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Reflections on Gender in Dialogue

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the larger endeavor of furthering the cause of justice in this world. Moreover, I can no longer be so naive as to regard women—and therefore myself—only as victims of wars (which, however, they often are) and men only as their perpetrators (which, however, they often are). My feminism has taught me that a claim to collective victimhood, apart from being historically inaccurate, may have its own problematic political consequences.

In the end, I believe that the primary victims of the “situation” in Israel/Palestine are the children on both sides. They are not only victims of the bloodshed, but they are deprived of the chance of looking at the world as a place in which they can be at home. Midrashic literature often characterizes women—particularly those who took part in the Exodus from Egypt—as being concerned about the next generation and the future of the Jewish people, while men are represented as giving up under the pressures belaboring the current generation. Although we should approach this plot structure with a hermeneutics of suspicion, it may indeed be us mothers who are more capable of acknowledging other mothers, across political dividing lines, as sharing our concerns for the wellbeing of our children. The Women in Black thus substantiate the midrashic idea. Herein may lay our unique responsibility to the future.

Notes

1. Susan Sonntag, “Looking At War: Photography’s View of Devastation and Death,” *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2002.
2. Henryk Broder, “Zur Hoelle mit den Konvertiten!” in W. Homolka and E. Seidel (eds.), *Nicht durch Geburt allein: Uebertritt zum Judentum* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), p. 23.

REFLECTIONS ON GENDER IN DIALOGUE

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There is a general assumption that women are more peace-loving, more “dovish” than men. Studies in North America and parts of Europe have indeed indicated statistically significant gender differences on various questions related to war and peace—for example, in relation to the 1991 Gulf War—as well as to violence and capital punishment. Studies conducted in

Israel have been less conclusive. Most of the polls have found no gender difference on questions related to substance, such as withdrawal from the territories. There have been gender differences regarding process, in that women display greater support than men for negotiations rather than the use of force.

There have also been discussions of gender differences with regard to the meaning of such concepts as “power” and “security” and to different thoughts that come to mind when discussing war. Hannah Arendt, for example, defines power as groups working together, while men tend to define it as “power over.” When Naomi Chazan and I conducted an in-depth study in Israel in the late 1980s, we found gender differences in people’s replies to the question: “what comes to your mind in response to the word war.” Women tended to respond in terms of injured and dead, bloodshed and suffering, while men were more likely to respond in terms of weapons and battles, strategy and serving.

These differences notwithstanding, feminist analyses justifiably shy away from an essentialist approach. Such cautiousness may lead to total rejection of the proposition that women are more dovish than men. Yet there are feminist explanations for gender differences of this kind, based on the concept of the social construction of gender, according to which many of the perceived differences between men and women are products of the traditions, cultures, values, mores, customs, education, and social relationships of the society in which a woman finds herself. Thus, without dismissing or ignoring the vast variations among and between women, there are non-essentialist explanations to the generally observed differences between women and men, at least with regard to how conflicts should be resolved.

It is interesting to note that such differences exist even in militarized societies—that is, societies that are engaged in prolonged armed conflict, such as Israeli society. Indeed militarization may have the effect of deepening these differences, rather than blurring them. At the very least, militarization does not appear to have eliminated the gender difference in attitudes toward the process for resolving conflict.

Having studied attitudes of women and men in Israel regarding peace and conflict, and having looked a bit at the impact of militarization on gender in Israel, I have tried more recently simply to look at my own experience, with regard to behavior rather than attitudes. My intention is to try to determine, based on my personal experience, how and where, if at all, gender plays a

role in peace activity. The form of activity I wish to examine is in the broad category of citizen diplomacy, specifically: dialogue. I present here not the findings of a broad research project based on questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and so on, but, rather an attempt to analyze the experience of some twenty-five years of personal involvement in dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. Some of my observations will be based on my involvement in dialogues between other groups in conflict, including Turkish and Greek Cypriots; Bosnians, Croats and Serbs; Protestants and Catholics from Northern Ireland; Africans, Coloreds, and Afrikaners from South Africa; Tamils and Ceylonese from Sri Lanka; and Tutsi and Hutu women from Burundi, whom I met in a one-time dialogue encounter. Some of these dialogues were mixed, while others were between women only. Zahira Kamal was a Palestinian partner in the vast majority of these encounters, and we have co-authored two studies of our experience, although these dealt with gender only peripherally.

There are many different types of dialogue, in terms of form, goals, participants, and time period. Dialogue may be public or closed; open to the participation of anyone who wants or by invitation; specialized (by group, gender, profession, age, etc.); in the region (Israel/Palestine) or abroad; direct or mediated by a third party; with or without facilitators; large or small; at the grass-roots level or on the level of elites (politicians, public figures, etc.). Dialogue may have a political objective, a professional purpose, or a social purpose; it may seek to produce a joint statement or joint action; and it may take place on a one-time basis or be sustained over a period of time. There may be still other variations and combinations of these variations. The experiences that I am examining included all of the above types of dialogue.

One may also study dialogue from various points of view. In our studies, we have discussed problems that arise in dialogue, such as cultural differences, language problems, logistical problems, and so forth, as well as the context in which dialogue takes place. In Palestinian-Israeli dialogue, as in many other contexts, there is a critical problem of asymmetry between the sides, in resources as well as in their respective sense of safety, power, independence, and so on. It is not my intention here to deal with these matters or to discuss the differences between Palestinians and Israelis, except as these appeared in connection with gender relations. Along with the many other differences between Israeli and Palestinian society, the latter is generally considered to be more traditional. Yet in my observations, the experience of gender,

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in mixed dialogues between Israelis and Palestinians, was identical: that is, women (and men) basically behaved in similar ways across national lines.

Mixed Dialogue

The following observations are based on my experience as a participant in dialogues including both men and women:

(1) On both sides, there were very few women participants in the mixed dialogues—usually no more than two or three out of ten, fifteen, twenty, or even thirty men, total. Occasionally there were more women on the Palestinian side than on the Israeli side, but rarely more than two or three even in these cases.

(2) Women spoke quite late in the meeting, if at all (a frequent phenomenon in many types of meetings). When they did speak, women were interrupted more often than the men were, and their comments tended to be ignored. If a man subsequently related to a comment already made by others, his references would be to a man, not even if a woman had said it first. The impression was that if a man made the comment, it had legitimacy. Women did speak earlier in the rare cases in which the encounter was chaired by a woman, but not when there was a woman facilitator or a third-party woman as chair.

(3) Men spoke longer than women did—excessively, and accusatorily, while the women who spoke were generally future-oriented.

In themselves, these observations are not particularly startling. Similar findings have been obtained in American studies of professional meetings, political committee meetings, and the like. What is interesting, however, is that these gender-related observations held for mixed male/female dialogues between Israelis and Palestinians, despite the cultural differences between the two groups.

Women-Only Dialogue

Of greater interest, perhaps, are the observed differences between women-only dialogue and dialogue in mixed groups.

(1) Perhaps the most striking difference lay in the presence of emotion at the opening of women's dialogue encounters. Mixed dialogue groups tended

to open with men presenting angry histories of the conflict and/or past injustices; women's dialogue groups tended to open with moving accounts of personal experiences. In a number of cases, these openings evoked tears all around and a good deal of shared emotions and stories.

The clear implication was that "the personal is political." One result of the women's openings was that they served immediately to break down barriers to dialogue. This was an advantage the mixed groups did not enjoy—quite the contrary, since the more aggressive openings of the men fortified rather than weakened the barriers already impeding dialogue.

(2) Women began from the point of "shared experience." On the one hand there was what one might call the shared experience of oppression. There was a sense, in women's dialogue, that no matter how different the strata of society or the respective cultures, we women, as women, had all experienced some form of oppression, discrimination, sexist slights—however different the specific content or context may have been. This was not a question of comparing suffering or victimization, but rather an understanding that in relation to men and patriarchal societies, we had experienced many of the same things. At the very least, women could build on a mutual understanding of the injustices experienced by women in any society.

Similarly, shared experience of a positive nature also helped to break down barriers. Both types of shared experience often were revealed in social conversation at breaks, in the women's restroom, or in jokes and informal comments. In one early dialogue, an Israeli participant apologized for arriving late, explaining that her daughter had begun her first menstrual period that morning. Nothing could have been more mutually binding for women than that explanation!

(3) Women's dialogue tended to have more social elements. Women mingled more between the groups than in mixed dialogue. There was more chit-chat and personal conversation, with women remaining after the formal talks, developing social, personal contact. In some cases the Palestinian women were less interested in this type of exchange, but in every case there was far more of it than with the men. Indeed, in my own experience I never saw this happen between the men, though it did happen between women in the mixed dialogues as well. The men, including the male chairs or facilitators, tended to keep things general and impersonal, at arm's length so to speak.

(4) Women sought less structure for the dialogue. For example, when Professor Herb Kelman conducted a mixed dialogue and a women's dialogue

in an identical format at Harvard, the participants in the women's dialogue rebelled against the structured discussion and sought a more free-flowing approach. For example, they asked to take up matters as they arose, without adhering to a strict outline or time schedule. Moreover, the women did not want a male facilitator or even any facilitator at all, on the grounds that they did not need one.

(5) On a less positive note, women sought to avoid the difficult issues. Having been socialized for the most part not to be confrontational, there was a tendency in women's dialogues to try to stay with the subjects upon which participants could agree. For example, one of the sustained dialogues avoided the issue of the future disposition of Jerusalem for a very long time. The women pussy-footed around it until they were finally able to come up with a compromise—a slogan in English that was translated one way in Arabic and another way in Hebrew. The issue was not squarely faced and subsequently returned in a disruptive manner. Similarly, the issue of the Palestinian refugees' right of return, long avoided, ultimately led to the indefinite suspension of the dialogue. In both these instances, it could be said that the issues weren't totally avoided, but they were postponed for long periods and broached only once a conscious decision had been taken by both sides to stop avoiding the difficult issues.

(6) A difference more apparent more on the Palestinian side was what may be viewed as a sense of vulnerability leading to certain militancy. Possibly because of their fragile position in the political sphere, the women did not want to appear "soft" or more compromising than the male leaders of their institutions. (This was evident in dialogues with women involved in other conflicts as well.) One of the Palestinian women pointed out privately to me that the Palestinian women seemed to need the consensus of their own group, in contrast to Palestinian men, who acted individually and boldly. The same could be said of Israeli men, with their sense of confidence and entitlement, but the Israeli women's behavior was not similar to that of the Palestinian women. This may have been because the Israeli women involved in dialogue were less mainstream, more marginal, in terms of their own society than the Palestinians were, and they were consequently less concerned about repercussions. They were willing to be ahead of (or simply different from) the consensus.

(7) Women on both sides were consistently concerned about reaching the grass roots, not remaining elitist. I never heard such concern expressed by men in dialogue. The men might speak of broadening the constituency,

reaching a larger public, but I never heard them express the need for grass-roots participation. On the women's side, this concern may have been a consequence of the sense of vulnerability described above; that is, the women wanted to be joined by others so as not to be isolated or exposed. In this case, however, the same concern was apparent on the Israeli side as well. It may be explained by a lack of a sense of self-worth, that is, by the need to feel a part of a larger group or the sense of not having the right to be considered part of the elite, in contrast to the male sense of entitlement. A more psychoanalytic explanation might see this distinction as connected with women's sense of responsibility, connectedness with the other, and sensitivity to social relations, as opposed to the male sense of separateness. It may even be connected with that differential conception of power that I mentioned earlier, that is, to the distinction between men's conception of power as "power over," enabling one to change or influence others, and women's conception of it as cooperation, working together.

(8) A characteristic of women's dialogue was compassion, as distinct from men's concentration on the issues. Women exhibited sensitivity in their frequent references to matters connected with suffering, loss of life, and violence. The men in the mixed groups did not ignore such matters as the closures, but they approached them in pragmatic terms rather than in terms of human suffering. This difference might be seen along the lines of the contrast between moral and pragmatic, or emotional and "objective" arguments—what some might call the contrast between the political and the personal, if the personal were not also, in fact, political.

(9) Possibly in connection with this same "personal is political" or emotional-compassionate approach, there was more concern for reconciliation in women's dialogue groups than in the mixed groups. Women more than men, though not exclusively, raised the matter of future generations, the need to get along and to achieve a degree of mutual trust. This difference, like that between the women's compassion and the men's pragmatism, may be attributable to the men's view of themselves as the leaders and negotiators who must deal with the issues and the larger picture, while women deal with daily life, family, food, children's needs, and so forth. This harks back to differing concepts of security, which men tend to view in terms of weapons systems, territory, borders, and strength, while women view security in terms of food on the table, a roof over their heads, clothing and education for their children—that is, human well-being.

Differences Among Women

The dialogue groups were far from homogeneous. Within each group as well as between them, there were differences in age, class, educational background, religion, and so on, as well as differences in political views, personality, and motivation for participating in dialogue. Bearing this in mind, there were some differences that stood out and may be instructive.

(1) The older women with experience in dialogue, both Israeli and Palestinian, tended to be more flexible than the younger women. Older women were more willing to seek compromise formulations and work together. This may have been a result of their history of dialogue, which produced a degree of trust and, consequently, a willingness to be flexible. It may also have been due to greater self-confidence on the part of the older women.

(2) The young women, on both sides, tended to be more militant. On the Israeli side this meant a greater willingness to identify with the Palestinian view of things; while on the Palestinian side it meant less flexibility or willingness to compromise in comparison with older colleagues. This distinction did not hold for all the participants, but there did seem to be something of a pattern to it, which was probably attributable more to experience than to age or background.

(3) Some of the women on both sides were feminists, while others were not. The feminists, particularly on the Israeli side, consciously and manifestly sought to behave or act in ways that reflected a feminist position, though it is not clear that this affected the outcomes. The Palestinian women, including the feminists among them, on the whole did not want to emphasize a feminist approach or a presumption of a bond based on gender, lest this blur the differences between the two groups or take precedence over other issues. Nonetheless, the element of gender consciousness did enter the picture in the choice of a women's framework within which to work, as distinct from a mixed group, and in the differences, whether acknowledged or even realized, between the all-women's groups and the mixed groups.

Conclusion

Concluding that women's dialogue was in some ways different from that of mixed groups, the question remains: Did these differences influence

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