

Feelings and perceptions about the relationship among young palestinians and young israeli women

Percepções e sentimentos sobre a relação entre as mulheres palestinas e israelitas jovens

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Abstract:

The aim of this essay is based on a personal concern and interest in young women. Being in Israel/Palestine my interest gained a fundamental and regional orientation's sit to illustrate this point: the Israeli State celebrates sixty years of its foundation while the Palestinians commemorate sixty years of Nakba – Nakba is an Arabic word that means catastrophe or disaster and it is used to designate the Palestinian exodus due to the Arab-Israeli war in 1948. Both sides are suffering from this situation and would like to change it. It's considered that this conflict-situation needs to change, for theirs and their families' futures.

Keywords:

Gender Relations. Women. Israel. Palestine

Resumo:

O objetivo deste ensaio está baseado em uma preocupação pessoal e em um interesse em mulheres jovens. Ao estar em Israel/Palestina, meu interesse adquiriu uma orientação fundamental e regional para ilustrar este ponto: o Estado de Israel comemora 60 anos de sua fundação, enquanto os palestinos comemoram 60 anos de Nakba – Nakba é uma palavra árabe que significa catástrofe ou desastre e é usado para designar o êxodo dos palestinos devido à guerra árabe-israelense em 1948. Ambos os lados estão sofrendo com esta situação e gostariam de mudá-la. Considera-se que esta situação-conflito precisa mudar para eles e para o futuro da família deles.

Palavras-chave:

Relações de Gênero. Mulheres. Israel. Palestina.

Introduction

Seven weeks have passed and we had the opportunity to not only visit many places, to meet people from several religions, including social leaders but also to learn about their different situations. Taking all that into account, I will venture to show that hiding behind peace, dialogue and coexistence are a variety of meanings, stances, and social, religious and political realities. Hence there are many varied conferences and organizations. Sometimes we try to define the conflict as one condition or characteristic such as:

political affiliation, religious creed or social standing, to separate it into the good and the bad and to put it in simple black-white terms. The stayed in Israel and Palestine gave me the opportunity to actually see the people, their life conditions, it opened my eyes and I definitely learnt more about others and the particular situation here. I have a new understanding of their experiences, as if I am looking at this reality with a new pair of lenses.

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Nakba – Nakba is an Arabic word that means catastrophe or disaster and it is used to designate the Palestinian exodus due to the Arab-Israeli war in 1948. Related to this I asked myself what are their thoughts and feelings toward the future and toward peace? I don't aim to do a sociological study of this reality. I prepared some questions that interested me and I asked young women when I had the opportunity, whether in a bus, in a street, or through those that gave us lectures and I sent them the questionnaire by e-mail. Their responses concerning their future enriched me greatly. Without exception I found that they all considered that this conflict-situation needs to change, for theirs and their families' futures. Both sides are suffering from this situation and would like to change it. I try to present their answers or their positions in the following pages.

During the development of the course where I stayed we have been attending lectures, talking with different organizations, to spend time with Palestinians (Muslims or Christians) and Jews. It was possible to listen to many women from different creeds that work with young people for peace and reconciliation. Many of them are training leaders that are slowly but progressively working to helping others to open their eyes to the situation they are living. In Palestine, for example, women collaborate with other Palestinian women to have possibilities to develop them economically or defend their human rights. There are a lot of organizations based on activities such as embroidery or cooking that are conducted by Palestinian women.

Israelis and Palestinians said it in different ways: *"Nobody could say I don't know what's happening, I don't know anything ... It's not possible! We live it daily with many hardships"*, and we also listen from Mrs. Lilli Habash talking about her daily experience in the checkpoint *"it's very different if we know each other"*. Basically their claim is that if they know each other, they will respect each other more. As far as I see, one of the fundamental problems here is the ignorance that they have toward one another, the prejudices and stereotypes learned and acquired through their own set of values, beliefs, and geographical locations. As much as one learns

about this complex situation, the answers to the conflict are not so clear-cut and the solution dissolves on the horizon.

Young women talked about their land.

"A land without a people for a people without a land" is a widely-cited phrase usually to take hold of the imagination of the proponents of a Jewish state. In this way they wanted to evoke an isolated, empty desert where the Jews could build a new state. Some of them until this day believe that all the land was given from God to them so the others –in this case Palestinians– must leave. *"The land is for Jewish people. The situation gets worse when some Palestinians don't recognize the State of Israel... every part of the land is promised to Jewish people"* (Stuart Shoffman during the lecture "The current political situation from an Israel point of view"¹⁸ Nov). After the 1967 war, the so called the six days war, we had the refugee camps¹ and the Palestinians that said that they will not accept the State of Israel as such. It is not easy to summarize in a few lines such a long conflict. Nonetheless, the "benchmark" of this conflict today is the wall constructed after many difficult and conflictive situations that occurred during the last years that caused a lot of suffering and emigration. This wall is mainly located around the West Bank only in some parts along the 1949 Armistice Line or Green Line, located between Israel and Jordan².

¹ Palestine refugees are persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 War (UNRWA - United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East).

² *Israel's Security Fence*. The State of Israel (February 22, 2004). Retrieved on 2007-04-17. "The Security Fence is being built with the sole purpose of saving the lives of the Israeli citizens who continue to be targeted by the terrorist campaign that began in 2000. The fact that over 800 men, women and children have been killed in horrific suicide bombings and other terror attacks clearly justifies the attempt to place a physical barrier in the path of terrorists. It should be noted that terrorism has been defined throughout the international community as a crime against humanity. As such, the State of Israel not only has the right but also the obligation to do everything in its power to lessen the impact and scope of terrorism on the

"This wall is a visible manifestation that for some people it is impossible to live together" said a Jew women. Talking with a Palestinian women who lives in Jerusalem and participates weekly in a public manifestation looking for their rights she explain me "I'm not agree with the wall, but we must also understand Jews people and the number of death because of the terrorist attack". The wall is still under construction and will have a length of seven hundred twenty kilometers and eight meters high.

For those who lived enclosed by the wall, to go out is not an easy task. In order to go out, they must pass the check point, sometimes they might need to spend there two or three hours being embarrassed in the treatment they received. To acquire the permit to go out is very difficult and sometimes they cannot even see their own families because the wall separates them. Similarly, the Jews cannot enter inside the Palestinian premises either.

I ask myself how do young women live this situation of conflict over the land? Do they really believe that it is impossible to live together? Maybe there is a generational gap in the way the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is perceived from each side.

I talked with a young woman from Beit Hanina who is suffering a lot from this situation because the wall was constructed in front of her house dividing her young family from her parent's house. She said to me with a lot of anguish "It is really strange for us because we grew up here and we cannot see our country in the World map. We could not understand it until we were 17 or 18 and till this moment we feel that we live without hope and of course there is a gap between the generations...".

One Jewish woman writes, "There are many young people 20-40 years old who think differently from their parents. They are more open to the world; they can have another perspective of the situation. I have many friends who really look for the way of DIALOGUE between 2 nations". Other women who lived all their lives the in the Palestinian territories suffer from the wall that divided their family, their friends, their history, but in spite of all this when I visit them I always found hope, "to share our life with others and that makes

us feel better because we depend on your prayers and we know that people from other countries are thinking of us". I also heard from another young Palestinian women about Jews, "They are terrorists. They have no hearts or feelings. No one who has feelings could kill a child". "They were born to Kill, is written on their helmets" adds Rani. "And the settlers are terrorists", says Vivian. "and the world calls us terrorists", "Palestinians, we are suffering economically", "we cannot go out to visit friends, it's also affecting our education".

But also we can hear from some Jews about the military service "when we are only fifteen years old, we receive the envelope talking about the kind of service we can do in the Arm. It's terrible! Sometimes we listen that everybody wants to go, but it's not really. But it's not easy to refuse to go to the army; it's a social obligation".

Asking about Palestinians who are living inside the refugee camps, young women admit that they are suffering a lot, and they are against this situation. Some Jews said "No one denies that Palestinians there are living in suffering and misery and that there are still many of them living in refugee camps". A girl who lives in a kibbutz and has the possibility to travel around the word said "I was in tul-karm³ refugee camp 2 weeks ago. When I was there, I was imprisoned because it was very poor, dirty, like slum. There are some Israelis who told me that 'they are getting enough money to rebuild their new life but they are using this money for making bombs, it is their fault' ...maybe it is true that many of refugees are getting money. But if they are really getting enough money and spending all the money for the weapons instead of better life, we have to look for why they are doing that, they must be in the hardest psychological situation". A Palestinian whose family is now suffering from the situation inside the West Bank said, "I didn't visit any of them because I had enough of sadness but I know exactly how they live and I understand that they suffered a lot and the most difficult thing is to be away from your original home by force". From the magazine Al

citizens of Israel."

³ **Tulkarm** or **Tulkarem** is a Palestinian city in the northwestern West Bank. This city and the adjacent refugee camp had a population of approximately sixty thousand inhabitants.

Majdal⁴ some talked about their situation as refugees. “We are refugees, we have lost everything. Our life is in our village, although we are among Palestinians we do not belong here, we belong to our land”.

In general many of the women commented on how this constant reality of suffering affects everyone. “*We are not the only ones that are suffering*” commented two young Palestinian women when I asked them about this situation. And at the same way we listened to Tamar Avraham who stayed with us talking about Peace and Reconciliation (13th Nov); “*Sometimes my people think that they are always victims*” she said “*It’s not possible to live all our life as victims from what it’s happening*”. A girl living in a kibbutz commented: “*I see Israeli people who are more than 60 years old are very Zionist in very deep way because their memories from Holocaust and their fight for survival are so strong.*”

Instead of conforming to this situation they seek change. Some of them believe that this is a political problem so they talked about a political change; “*We must have two states. Gaza and West bank in the same State but they are separated geographically. This possibility was studied many years ago.*” Another Jew talked about the Israeli State as a Democratic State, “*the problem is that some Palestinians didn’t recognize it. I think that it is possible to have Palestinians and Jews in the same State. Every part of the Land was promised to the Jews.*”

In other cases the change is based on a religious change. Jewish woman said, “*as religious people, we must be sure that the Bible is not used against Human Rights*”. In the Redeemer Church, Bishop Munib Younan shared with us his point of view, “*I want in Israel a secular state that respects the three religions because we must to work together. And also I want a society that respects women and men equally*”. And a Muslim woman Safa Abu Assab (4th Nov), in a lecture ‘Women’s role in Islam’ talking about many States around the word expressed “*We must have the faith separated from the State, like a secular state. Everybody can believe or not believe, as he/she wants. The faith is something personal, so it shouldn’t be united with the state.*”

⁴ AL MAJDAL, *Special Nakba*. Featuring profiles of Palestinian refugees around the world. Badil. Palestinian: Team, 60 issue 36/37 (The authors remains anonymous).

Here our identity card says if you are Jewish, Muslim or Christian”. In the Sabeel Conference –19th Nov, Mrs. Lilli Habash shared her position talking about the necessity of our personal reconciliation “*everybody must have reconciliation first with his history, with his life so we can all live together*” “*many of the `truths` are lies or they are disturbed*”

Young women talked about peace

I was touched when I heard, inside a refugee camp, how two young women commented on their desire to have peace instead of the difficult situation they are living. In some Palestinians I found a very strong hope inspite of the daily humiliation at the check points. I heard also some Jews who didn’t want to do the military service and they sent a letter to the president talking about this. I know Jews and Palestinians who belong to different groups trying dialogue, to know “*the other*”, their culture, faiths, and they work together for peace and justice. Some of them said that some years ago they were friends, but the last intifada made them to view “*the other*” as an enemy or a possible terrorist.

Is it possible to have peace in this situation? What is the meaning of a life here in a very difficult situation where the future seems so enclosed? If we come to this country for a few days maybe we reduce the solution to three or four words, because we think we know the way to resolve this situation. Staying almost two months I have more questions than answers. One conflict cannot be simplified as one side the instigator and the other the victim. Sometimes peace is understood as a situation without any kind of conflict. For some Jews peace means that “*the others*” -in this case Palestinians- accept this situation and be grateful about all the possibilities they have. It means security and it was necessary to separate Palestinians from them, owners of the land. And for some Palestinians it means justice, dialogue and to be considered as human beings. Peace is an objective to achieve but there are a lot of barriers to get over without reaching for personal justice only.

The young Palestinian women living in Beit Henina said about peace “*We pray for peace and of course it is possible if both sides takes the advantages of it*”

and look for a better life in the future"...From the kibbutz I received this position "Peace is possible. I am looking for the way, too. After my visit to Palestine 2 weeks ago, my point of view totally changed. I was thinking that both sides have to stop what they are doing right now about violence. But now I think, Israel has to give hand first, because Israel is stronger. Who has more power, has to give from its power, and people are so scared of each other. They hardly know each other. Since the wall is built up, maybe the terror attack got less but also the people meet each other less, and the hatred, frustration and untrust are growing".

But with sadness we cannot ignore that some of them are waiting the military service to "serve my country and stop the terror..." "I will never kill a child" "I want peace but not coexistence". In a different light we also hear "how can I live with people who want to kill me", "the Christian religion is a peaceful religion, Islam is also a peaceful religion but it says, not to surrender your rights without resistance... violence should be the last form of resistance".

Looking to the future we can find hope in the solution to this conflict. Some of them said about themselves that they are *optimistic*, because they see many positive desires to make things better. For most of them the problem was during this last ten years because there were high hopes for peace but in certain moments it broke up and the depression and disappointment were enormous. And *maybe in this present moment* –they say- *a lot of Israeli people (and of course Palestinian side too) are in this "desperation"*. Asked about their future they are sure that this situation will change but only with the collaboration of all sides. "After 2-3 generation, it's going to be like normal thing to have my Palestinian friend we can see good examples in the young generation, they don't have any hatred towards German people" said one Jewish woman. In spite of her difficult situation one Palestinian woman said in different ways "Everything is possible with hope and you never know, but because every nation has different ways of life this might cause conflict, but after a long time and by overcoming daily problems you can reach a solution ... All of them think that after achieving the peace reconciliation is possible, "it will take time and all of us must believe and work".

As we can read in ZARU, Jean book's "Occupied

with not violence"

What will bring us peace is inward transformation that will lead into outward action. Our miseries are not going to stop by condemnation or disapproval, and certainly no by barbed wire, rockets and bombs. Is we see the urgency for real transformation, only then will we transform ourselves. Peace will come when we have made the costly decision to be a peace with our neighbors. We cannot live a day without saying yes or no for death or for life, for war or for peace, injustice or justice.⁵

Conclusion

After the few days I was here, I dare say as a conclusion for this essay, based in some "*feelings and perceptions about the relationship among young Palestinians and young Israeli women*", that I believe the change is comes in two different ways that I will outline below. The first one is to emphasize the essential nature of the mutual knowledge and openness both Palestinians and Israelis must reach in order to reduce their own ethnocentrism and hopefully move more towards a cultural relativism. The ethnocentrism that means to look at other peoples' cultures from our own cultural perspective and to judge them accordingly, is in some situations very strong. I think that what is crucial here is that both Jews and Palestinians start to learn more about each other. And to know each other means to learn about their history, their suffering, and their religious expression. Many organizations shared with us their experience; they indicated to us how they try to accomplish this by doing different learning activities and/or conducting meetings. Some teachers, who teach Islam to Jews and vice versa, are trying to do their share in different ways. For example, by bringing a Muslim to attend classes at the Western Wall. And their experience is in general very positive⁶.

Hence, it is essential to open spaces where they can know each other, so they can grown in their cultural relativism. For that it is necessary to get to

⁵ ZARU, Jean. *Occupied with nonviolence*. A Palestinian Woman Speak. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008. p 129.

⁶ ARAB EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE, "*Hope against hope, Stories and thoughts about life in Palestine*", ed 2008. p. 18.

know the other, their values and beliefs and look at them from as close to their own perspective as possible.

In the same light I found it very interesting when Dr Debbie Weissman⁷ talked to us on 11th Nov "both Palestinians and Jews, we are victims that means they are not angels in one side and demons in the other. We have some difficulty with the idea of the other". She also explained to us how the words other and brother are closely linked. In Hebrew and also in Arabic the word other has inside its composition the word brother (acher means the other and ach means brother).

The second way is based on the relevant number of organizations that work towards peace and unity, by respecting each other and seeking justice and equality. To me peace is a way of life, not only an objective. Many organizations, from political, social and /or educative standpoints try in different ways to achieve peace and mutual coexistence. In that they are a clear proof that the answers to this conflict is generated in groups and organizations that work together seeking common goals.

I conclude this essay (*based in the feelings or perceptions about the relationship among young Palestinians and young Israeli women*) saying, that from my short experience here, if a real change will happen, then as far as possible these two ways must be taken into account, alongside the real suffering of all the human beings and the families in this very hard situation. This means that attaining peace cannot be regarded as a hopeless case.

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⁷ **Debbie Weismaan** is a Jewish educator and interfaith activist, based in Jerusalem. She holds a Ph D. in Jews education and has lived in Israel since 1972. She is one of the founders of the Yedidyah Synagogue in Talpiot.