

The World Is Wept: JUST Listening in Israel and Palestine

In March 2008, a group of mediators from Philadelphia traveled to Israel and Palestine to JUST Listen to individuals from a range of social, cultural, and political backgrounds. Sponsored by the Association for Conflict Resolution, Philadelphia's Good Shepherd Mediation Center, and JUST Listening, the group sought to gain a deeper understanding of the entrenched conflict there, and then to bring the stories home and share them through presentations to interested groups in the United States. This article describes some of what we heard on the journey.

JUST Listening is an effort to foster social change by practicing, promoting and teaching other-centered, compassionate, and non-judgmental listening skills. As highly skilled listeners, the mediators thought that a JUST Listening trip was an ideal use of their talents; the training for the trip therefore built upon their considerable expertise. But even these seasoned mediators were challenged daily to maintain their equilibrium and neutrality in the volatile, highly-charged milieu of the Holy Land; every person found it difficult to listen with compassion, openness, and

curiosity, and without judgment or ego. Daily debriefing sessions were needed to process the experience and manage our own intense, often-conflicted emotions.

The Holy Land, Israel and Palestine, is an achingly beautiful place: the stark, barren beauty of the Judean and Negev Deserts, the perfect orchards and fields of that land flowing with milk and honey, the Galilee, the Hula Valley, the buoyant waters of the Dead Sea, the breath-taking blue of the Mediterranean. There are mountains, valleys, deserts, rivers, seas, an amazing topographical cornucopia echoing the diversity of the denizens: Jews, Muslims, Christians, Ba'Hai, Druze, Bedouin. There is an energy of the Sacred that permeates the landscape.

On the evening of our arrival at a Jerusalem hotel following a long flight and a sleepless 24 hours, sirens alerted us to a heartbreaking event: a man had entered a nearby yeshiva and slaughtered eight young students. And so, with tensions even higher than usual, we plummeted into ten days of intense JUST listening, listening through the lens of justice to individuals on all sides of the conflict.

Some listening sound bytes

- The grieving, angry father of a murdered Jewish boy describes his son's grisly death at the hands of a group of Palestinian thugs; they crushed his head with a rock. Of his child's murderers he says, "I don't see them as human beings. I don't plan to relate to them as human beings."
- Another father, this time Palestinian, describes a sleepless night with his children, listening to screams and shouts in the dark as a gigantic Israeli bulldozer levels a house in his Bethlehem neighborhood, home to relatives of a suspected terrorist. Speaking of both Israelis and Palestinians, he says, "All of our children are traumatized. . . . And all of us are hostages to fear."



- Jewish residents of the prosperous settlement of Gush Etzion, describe their anguish and grief: one of the eight students killed in the yeshiva was a neighbor.
- As her father speaks of his struggles, the small child of the leader of a Palestinian nonviolence movement guilelessly hands out

rubber bullets to guests; souvenirs of her father's encounters with Israeli soldiers enforcing the expansion of settlements in their town.

- A young mother in one of the Israeli settlements reports that she has purchased an M-16 rifle and registered for shooting lessons "for protection" from their Palestinian neighbors.
- A doctor in Nablus, West Bank, takes us to see Refugee Camp #1, where displaced Palestinians have lived since 1967, waiting to return to the homes from which they were expelled. We see unimaginably narrow, dirty streets, corrugated tin roofs, dim, dark squalor, appalling conditions. "This," he says, "is where the Intifada starts."
- Tamar, an Israeli settler who engages in her own personal brand of bridge building by, for example, assisting a Palestinian neighbor in obtaining healthcare for a desperately sick child, tells us: "Person to person we could be fine. But we are so afraid. No hate here. No hate. Only fear."
- Zhoughbi Zhoughbi, Director of the Wi' Am Palestinian Center for Conflict Resolution in Bethlehem tells us, "There is no future in this context without restorative justice. By this I mean addressing the injustices, not avenging them,

empowering the weak and bringing the strong to their senses, not to their knees.”

On one day we would hear Palestinian stories of brutal treatment at the hands of Israeli soldiers, the humiliation and impossibility of a normal life in the shadow of checkpoints and the separation wall built on the Green Line¹, economic hardship, water uncertainties and rivalries, the steady loss of land and access to what remains, occasioned by the steady encroachment of Israeli settlements. The next day would bring tales of displacement and fear, living in the path of Hamas rockets which rain down random violence in residential Israeli neighborhoods; memories of being in a cafeteria when a suicide bomber drove his car into it, killing people eating their lunch. It is easy to lose one’s way in the conflicting claims, righteous anger, and, permeating everything, the deep, abiding and unhealed grief over past losses and injustices on all sides.

¹ The Green Line refers to the line drawn somewhat arbitrarily (literally in green ink) by army generals on a map of the area in 1949, designating the areas reserved to Israelis and Palestinians respectively (among other groups). The territory inside the Green Line is commonly referred to as The West Bank, and called Palestine by those who reside there. It constitutes only 21.5% of what was Palestine in 1947.

If visitors without a personal stake in the issues had such difficulty, how much harder is it to be a participant in the struggle and maintain an open heart, a compassionate stance, a willingness to seek and make peace? And yet, we found people throughout the land doing precisely that—the co-existence groups building bridges through music, art, circuses; after-school programs, language lessons; Israeli Jews and Palestinian non-violent activists together resisting the spread of settlements; mediation groups on both sides of the Green Line; former Israeli soldiers and Palestinian combatants working together to forge strong, binding links of peace.

Time and again, we were reminded by those to whom we listened of all that Palestinians and Israelis share. Many of those who spoke of their lives and visions draw on these commonalities as inspiration both for mutual projects and for a sustaining vision of a healed society. These are the bridges that will build peace, they insisted. Their lists include hospitals; universities; sports; the deep intertwining religious roots of the Abrahamic traditions; cultural and customary similarities, such as food, dance, and a love of Turkish coffee; a belief in the importance of resisting oppression and injustice; a propensity for talking one’s way out of problems. All of these similarities are being celebrated, emphasized,

and utilized creatively in a plethora of projects and programs aimed at unifying those who seem so utterly divided.

Despite intense suffering, deep divisions, and the seeming intractability of the conflict, we were heartened by the courageous efforts of so many to make and sustain peace. We found hope where you can always find hope—in the hearts of people who still dream of peace and hunger for justice. And we encountered those people everywhere we went, on both sides of the Green Line, among those trapped inside barbed wire and those trapped outside of it. We heard of common struggles, common values, a shared culture, a shared love of land and family, of justice and peace. As Elias, an ancient man in Nablus told us with great heart and passion, “Everywhere” he said. “Everywhere people long for peace.”

Almost everyone agreed that it will take a very long time, and maybe even a miracle, for peace to come to this hauntingly beautiful, spirit-filled Holy Land. But the good news is that miracles are simply what happens when we remain open to surprise, when suffering hearts get cracked open and let compassion in, and when our ears are willing to listen. Israelis and Palestinians are ripe for a miracle.

On the plane home, one of the medi-

ators handed me a poem. Taken from the Truth and Reconciliation documents in South Africa, it seemed a fitting final commentary on all we had heard and experienced.

*The world is wept.
Blood and pain seep into our listening,
into our wounded souls.
The sound of your
sobbing is my own weeping;
Your wet handkerchief my pillow for a
past so exhausted it cannot rest...not
yet.
Speak, weep, look, listen for us all.
Oh, people of the silent hidden past,
Let your stories scatter seeds into our
lonely frightened winds,
Sow more, until the stillness of this land
can soften, can dare to hope and smile
and sing;
Until the ghosts can dance unshackled,
Until our lives can know your sorrows
And be healed.²*

Many, many people on all sides are working actively to unshackle the ghosts, know each others' sorrows, do the work of healing. As-Salamu Alaykum. Shalom. Peace.

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*A video of the trip is now available.
For further information contact Sharon
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*See p. 22 for info on CPF's Vigil for Peace in
the Middle East*

¹ Poem written by a white participant in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Found in Desmond Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p.118)