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## RELIGION: While hatred brews in Holy Land, Brooklyn's Jews and Arabs interact through dialogue and gardening



By Francesca Norsen Tate, Religion Editor  
Brooklyn Daily Eagle  
The peace-building work of The Dialogue Project here in Brooklyn — especially its new youth corps — becomes even more crucial amid breaking news on Monday about the arrest of Israeli teens, one as young as 13, who had assaulted a group of Palestinians last week in West Jerusalem.

New York Times reporter Isabel Kershner, in an article published online late Monday, pointed out, "The attack, described by one witness as a 'lynch,' has laid bare the undercurrent of Jewish-Arab tensions that

plague this mixed but politically divided city and that is leading many Israelis to question how their society could have come to this."

The attacks in Jerusalem underscore the need for building cultural gardens here.

This week in Park Slope, Brooklynites and New Yorkers who are Jewish, Muslim, Israeli and Palestinian will join forces to plant a garden and then display the benefits of discarding stereotypes through dialogue. They will work the plot of Eman Rashid, a Palestinian-American who meets with Israelis and Jewish Americans, through The Dialogue Project.

Ms. Rashid, an active community gardener, said, "Through the dialogue process, we learn to see others as human beings, not 'labels,' and come to understand why people act out of fear and a need for safety. I lived in Palestine for three years; I was shot at, yet in Dialogue I am able to sit across from Israeli soldiers and speak to them as they do to me, as human beings."

The Dialogue Project organized this event during which the groups will clean and plant together at the 615 Green Community Garden, on Sixth Avenue and 12th Street in Park Slope starting at 6:30 p.m. Afterwards, they will conduct a dialogue that demonstrates the benefits of relating to others as individuals rather than stereotypes through the Dialogue Project.

Since early 2001, following the violence kicked off by the second Palestinian intifada and the Israelis' march across the Al-Aqsa mosque plaza in Jerusalem, New Yorkers with direct ties to the Middle East have been meeting in an effort to challenge their own fears and the stereotypes each has of the other. Now in its 11th year, The Dialogue Project has seen many of its participants move from mistrust to working together on concrete social, educational and environmental issues here in New York City and in the Middle East.

"Dialogue creates a safe environment for us to learn how to listen to each other's personal histories and attachments to the land," said Marcia Kannry, the Dialogue Project's founder. "Protecting the land is critical for both Israelis and Palestinians for whom water shortages and control, deforestation and global warming loom large," she continued. Ms. Kannry lived in Israel and worked as a regional director of The Jewish National Fund in the 1980s. She now lives in Brooklyn.

Marius Zilber, an Israeli participant, sees the planting at the Community Garden as a symbolic effort and one of the fruits of the Dialogue program, which he admits he first entered with wariness and even some suspicion. Now, he says, "If we are going to work on concrete matters together, we have to take the first steps of trust-building and exploration with each other — this is a good beginning."



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In fact, other Dialogue program participants have also wanted to enhance their experience by working on action projects here in New York City and in supporting Israeli and Palestinian partnerships in education and the environment in the Middle East. In Manhattan, for example, dialoguers have started organizing drives for local food banks.

Project director Kannry identifies these efforts as the next step in the project's development. "This type of project brings words and actions together. In Dialogue, we air and discuss intense topics and try to drive home the idea that, though complicated ideas may exist and persist between peoples of different faiths, beliefs, or cultures, we can still live, work, and even thrive together."

The Dialogue Project is a nonprofit organization that creates face-to-face encounters among Muslim, Jewish, Israeli and Palestinian New Yorkers who meet through structured dialogues. This model helps participants learn about each other as individuals and to bridge the political and cultural divides that separate them.

Dialogue conflict transformation programs run in Westchester and Manhattan as well as Brooklyn. Through the Project's Coffee and Conversation series, New Yorkers, who often have no social relationships with new immigrants in their neighborhoods, are paired with newcomers from Africa, Latin American, Eastern Europe and the Middle East over a six-week period, meeting to practice English and to break through the isolation of the new immigrant experience.

The Dialogue Project's most recent endeavor, the Brooklyn Youth Dialogue Corps, develops youth dialogue facilitators from diverse ethnic, social and economic backgrounds. Travelling to each other's meeting places, new immigrant teens and third- and fourth-generation New York teens, ages 14 to 17, learn about cultures and traditions that they may have stereotyped in the past. Together they develop leadership skills through an eight-month creative mentorship program.

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