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National

Arab-Israeli Dialogue

By Joshua B Brustein

A middle aged Palestinian couple from Nablus, a town on the West Bank, sat on a couch flanked by two former Israeli soldiers. An American Jewish woman sat next to an Arab Israeli man. The group of people at the Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture on this hot day come from Iran and Philadelphia, Manhattan and Yemen. They were all here to participate in a monthly meeting of the [Dialogue Project](#), which tries to bring together Jews and Palestinians to learn about the Middle East through one another's eyes.

After the group went through a round of introductions, [Debbie Almontaser](#), an observant Muslim wearing a hijab, turned to the man next to her to ask a question. He is Benny Dazidovitch, a light skinned Israeli with a shaved head, and one of the men in the room who served in the Israeli army during the first intifada (uprising). Dazidovitch had recently returned from Israel, and Almontaser wanted to know how being a member of the dialogue project caused him to change his outlook while he was in his home country.

Dazidovitch admits to being disappointed in his own attitude while he was in Israel. "After being in this group and getting to know the 'other', I had a self-expectation to be more sensitive," he starts, "But I had a hard time sympathizing when I was there. [When I'm in the Middle East] I'm Israeli, I'm a target, and my physical being is in danger."

Achmad Samhan, a Palestinian restaurateur, offers his own experience in Palestine as a parallel to Dazidovitch's. "The same thing you feel, that you're a target, it's happening with me," he tells Dazidovitch from across the room. "How can I tell my nephews about dialogue when they are getting smacked around like rag dolls?" Frustration and anger are evident in the young man's voice. "You want to go home with a different mindset — but as soon as you get off the airplane this is what you feel."

Samhan and Dazidovitch have been talking like this for over a year. Now, instead of seeing difficult or conflicting feelings as a barrier to understanding, they use them to find common ground. This wasn't always the case.

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When they first started coming to the group, says Marcia Kannry, the group's founder, "they couldn't even look at each other." Since then they have become more and more friendly. Now, she says, when Dazidovitch comes to a meeting and Samhan is already sitting down, the Israeli greets the Palestinian with an affectionate squeeze on the shoulder.

This has not been an easy jump to make. Samhan's visit to the Middle East shook him enough that he did not come to a meeting for three months. Kannry enlisted members of the group to try and convince him to return. "One by one we all kept going over to his restaurant, or calling him. And he came back," Kannry smiles as she talks about the program after the meeting has ended. "He couldn't stay away."

Across the room, Samhan and Dazidovitch stand in a small circle with a few other members, chatting and snacking on the pita bread and hummus that has been laid out on a table in the corner.

The Dialogue Project has been meeting since March 2001. Kannry decided to start the group after she was personally sickened by Ariel Sharon's walk on the Temple Mount, the action that sparked the second Palestinian *intifada*.

Kannry was born in Long Island, but spent five years in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s. While in Israel Kannry became engaged. But her fiancée, an Israeli soldier, was killed in an ambush by Palestinian militants. Trying to "keep [her] heart open", but also feeling herself becoming more hawkish politically, Kannry felt conflicted. Eventually she returned to the United States.

In New York, Kannry once again found herself in a Jewish community with Arab neighbors. And the current cycle of violence in the Middle East worsened, she began to see things happening in that community that made her feel uncomfortable. "I was upset," said Kannry, "because in the synagogue...every conversation was they, they, they, they." Eventually, she had to leave, because she felt that the charged atmosphere was not a place she could consider her spiritual home.

Tensions between Jewish and Arab Americans were heating up throughout Brooklyn at this time. In the Brooklyn hospitals and schools, many which have mixed staffs, people were reporting terrible comments being thrown back and forth. Casual social interactions between Jewish and Arab New Yorkers turned cold. Many people agreed that there was "a hesitancy or pulling back where there had once been friendly banter."

Kannry began to organize a large, public forum, looking for supporters in the local business and religious communities. She sought out the support of State Senator (now Brooklyn Borough President) [Marty Markowitz](#), and State Assemblyman Jim Brennan. Both made donations, and Markowitz wrote an official letter of support which

Kannry took to local businesses in the area, asking for help. Soon she collected the \$800 she needed.

Debbie Almontaser was the first Arab member of the group. She is a Brooklyn community activist and teacher whose family immigrated to New York from Yemen when she was three years old. Almontaser admits to being very hesitant at first. But she got together to have a cup of coffee with Kannry anyway. The two hit it off, and after what turned into a three-hour meeting Almontaser was convinced of the potential of the idea.

Almontaser then began to look for participants from Brooklyn's Arab communities. This was a difficult task, but one that became easier as the Dialogue Project gained a reputation. "It was unheard of," said Almontaser. "When I would mention it to people they would look at me like I had lost it something. But [I continued] talking to them and introducing them to other members of the project and letting them know about this safe space that [we] have within the circle. The desire to be able to share your beliefs and concerns, and to be heard, was there. People let their guard down and started coming."

The Dialogue Project sets out to create a confidential place, that fosters a sense of safety, allowing participants to speak honestly while also listening to the opinions of others that would not hear otherwise. In the casual social situations where Jews and Arabs regularly meet — at school, work, or in the street — there is often a careful attempt to avoid tension. This can be damaging, says Kannry, as people nod their heads and keep their mouths shut, only to walk away fuming.

While there is a measure of respect demanded, the dialoguers do not pull punches. "Sometimes dialogues can be shouting matches," Kannry said to the group, who responded with a knowing laughter.

The Dialogue Project is growing. There are currently 7 circles in the New York area, and a waiting list of participants that tops 1,000. An Interface project has brought non-Muslims to a mosque and non-Jews to a synagogue — the same synagogue that Kannry left two years before. Short-term dialogues have been set up in schools and workplaces. After September 11th, dialogues have allowed people to deal with tensions between Muslim-Americans and non-Muslim Americans. A foundation grant to take participants to the Middle East together is in the works. Eventually, Kannry hopes to have 20 or 30 circles throughout the area.

The group's members are also preparing for September 11th. A Palestinian-Jewish musical performance will be taking place at Manhattan's Society for Ethical Culture. Kannry plans to go there for "dialogue around the music" on the 11th, after visiting a synagogue for prayer. She will also take part in the vigil that Debbie Almontaser is planning for the Brooklyn waterfront. The vigil will be a walk from

Atlantic Avenue to the Brooklyn Heights promenade. Almontaser is also involved in a candlelight vigil planned for Washington Square Park.

The events that the Dialogue Project organizes are meant to help its members heal from the wounds that ethnic and religious tensions have caused. One thing that the project does not hope to accomplish is a theory for a political solution. The goal is more personal, says Kannry, who hopes that participating in the dialogue will allow people to start to discuss these issues with the people in the communities who don't come to meetings. This is a difficult task. As an exercise in the meeting at the Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture, the participants were asked how comfortable they would be talking to their families about co-existence. Many said not very. But the effort breeds confidence. "Perhaps there will be a time when we can be ambassadors to our own families here," says Kannry. "To that village that's being occupied. To my family, after my fiancée was killed. To his family. Who can't hear right now. I can have the courage to go and speak up."



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